IDENTIFICATION OF CROWS

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In Vol. 21, page 17, of this journal, in our paper, "Mid Northern Bird Observations," the field differences between the Raven and Little Crow are discussed. Unfortunately, a portion of our manuscript was omitted in the printed version, with the result that certain information in column 1, page 17, is incorrect.

In this paper we wish to correct this matter. We have also extended the subject considerably, to include identification, both of collected specimens and in the field, of all three species of Corvus occurring in South Australia. A large part of our material is a summary of a number of papers in this journal by E. F. Boehm, and for our knowledge of field and plumage differences between the Raven and Little Crow we are indebted to the personal tuition of Mr. Boehm, whom we also thank for advice and criticism in the preparation of this paper.

We feel that repetition of portions of Mr. Boehm's papers is justified in that a more or less complete guide to the identification of the three species now appears in one article.

There has always been a great deal of confusion regarding the identification of the Australian "crows," both in collected specimens and in the field. For example, it was long regarded by many ornithologists that brown-eyed birds were Crows, and white-eyed birds Ravens, whereas the eye-coloring of all three species of Corvus is the same, i.e., brown in juveniles, white in adults. The color of the feather bases has led to further confusion. In recent years Boehm has made a number of contributions towards the accurate identification of the various species.

"CROWS"—Genus CORVUS

Rather large, entirely black birds, the plumage having a blue or violet sheen in certain lights. The feathers of the throat (hackles) are lanceolate. The legs and heavy beak are black. The iris is white (normally with an inner ring of pale blue), and the inside of the mouth is black. The sexes are alike in plumage, the female being slightly smaller.

Color of plumage may vary. Albinism is well known in the Raven, and there are records of grey-colored Little Crows (6). A brown or coppery tinge sometimes occurs, due to fading and wear of feathers (2), or to a brown mutation (7).

Juveniles have, as a rule, a pink pharynx and dark brown irides (blue-grey when they first leave nest), the plumage is rather dull black, especially on the ventral surface, the hind-neck and crown of the head; the contour feathers of the throat are round-tipped and the base of the nape feathers is dark in the Raven, paler and not necessarily sharply defined in the two Crows. (1), (5)

Immature adults have the irides medium brown to light brown and dirty white, rarely white with an inner ring of delicate blue; the feathers are more compact and shining, especially on the hind-neck, crown and throat, and the feathers of the throat are elongate, or at least pointed. The color of the base of the nape feathers is characteristic of the species to which they belong. (1)

Gregarious, except when nesting; principally ground feeders; omnivorous (carrion, insects, fruit etc.). Walk when on ground. The flight is normally strong and direct and the voice a loud cawing.

The chief points in identifying the species in collected specimens are the color of the base of the body feathers (in particular those of the nape), and in our opinion in the field the call.

RAVEN (CORVUS CORONOIDES)

Hackles long, greater than 31 mm. in length in adult; grey (occasionally dirty white) base to body feathers (in particular those of the nape) not sharply defined from the black. (3). Length 20-22 ins. Dwarfism is known to occur. (4)

Voice distinctive—melancholy, usually ending in a long, drawn-out, mournful, descending note. A typical call may be written phonetically, "Gwarr gwarr carr carrrrr----r." A call rather like that of the Little Crow is also given, but always lacking the distinct nasal quality peculiar to the latter species, and the notes are seldom as sharp-cut. Juveniles have a different call from older birds, it being not unlike that of the Little Crow, but without the nasal quality.

Normal flight is strong and direct, or a slow lazy flapping, often broken by glides. The wing-beats are usually deep.

Range:—The common "Crow" of southern South Australia, and the only species normally
present in much of the settled areas. Occurs throughout all types of country in the southern portion of South Australia (including Kangaroo Is. and other islands off coast), north to at least Olary Spur, the Lake Frome Basin, and the Lake Eyre Basin east of longitude 138 degrees. (3)

LITTLE CROW (CORVUS BENNETTI)

Hackles short, less than 31 mm. Snow white (occasionally dirty white) base to body feathers (in particular those of the nape) sharply defined from the black. Culmen less than 50 mm., tarsus less than 60 mm. Length 16½ to 19 ins. It is considered that the plumage of this and the following species is softer and more glossy than that of the Raven, and with usually less purple and more blue reflections on crown and ventral surface. (3)

The smaller size is distinguishable in the field when one of the larger species is also present. Single birds within the range of the Raven should not be identified on size alone, as dwarfism is known to occur in the Raven. (4)

Although often called the Short-billed Crow, the bill is no shorter in proportion to the length of the bird than in the other two species.

Voice distinctive:—a short, very sharp-cut "Glaark," usually repeated three to five times with about a second, or a little less, interval between. The note has a distinct nasal quality, lacking in a somewhat similar call of the Raven. The long, drawn-out final note of the Raven is never given by the Little Crow.

In normal flight the wing-beats are distinctly shallower and faster than in normal Raven flight, giving a somewhat fluttering effect. If calling, bennetti frequently undulates in flight, rather like a cuckoo.

Range:—Occurs generally north of latitude 33 deg. S. Has been recorded west of the Flinders Ranges south to Port Germein; on the Murray Flats south to Kinchinnna and Murray Bridge, and in the Murray Mallee south to about latitude 36 deg. S. (3), with a southern extension to the Millicent area, where it inhabits a coastal strip of open country clad with large grass tussocks and a few Sheoak (Casuarina stricta) trees.

Also occurs on upper Eyre Peninsula, and may be expected to occur in the northern districts of Yorke Peninsula and the Adelaide Plains north of the Gawler River. (8) It probably occurs elsewhere in the South-East.

In the southern portion of its range (with the possible exception of the Millicent coastal area), the number of this species present in any area is generally only a small proportion of the total Corvus population (e.g. about 5 per cent. at Sutherlands).

CROW (CORVUS CECILAE)

Hackles short, less than 31 mm. Snow white (occasionally dirty white) base to body feathers (in particular those of the nape) sharply defined from the black. Culmen longer than 50 mm.; tarsus longer than 60 mm.; length 20 to 22 ins. Identical with Little Crow, but larger. This difference in size is distinguishable in the field if both species are seen together. However, the call is possibly the safest field guide to all three species of Corvus.

Voice said to be distinctive:—a short note, not so deep as that of the Raven, and said by Serventy and Whittell 10) to sound like "oh, oh," rather than the bass, long-drawn-out "ah-h-h" of the Raven. However, MacGillivray (9) gives the call as "a harsh short 'Ahr, ahr'."

We have no information on the flight of the Crow.

Range:—Occurs in the North-west of the State, and in the Lake Eyre Basin west of longitude 138 deg., approximately north of about 31 deg. latitude, and probably also occurs in the North-east portion. May occur much further south in the western part of the State. (Boehm, personal communication.)

In conclusion, it need hardly be stressed that any dead "Crows" found should be examined carefully, and that anyone visiting the more remote portions of the State should endeavor to discover which species of Corvus occur in those areas. If possible specimens should be collected and forwarded to an authority on the subject. Of particular importance would be specimens from the areas in which the ranges of the Raven and Crow overlap.

Literature cited:—

(1) Boehm, E. F. 1940. S.A. Ornith., vol. 15; p. 94.


(9) Macgillivray, Wm. 1918. Emu, vol. 17, p. 211.