



American Crow

Corvus brachyrhynchos

Drive a few miles “as the crow flies” through North Carolina farmland and you’re likely to see these large, black birds dotting the fields. Common and conspicuous, the crow can be found in every county in the state. Its familiar, shiny plumage makes this bird easy to spot, but it is probably identified best by its distinctive “caw,” which gave the bird its name.

History and Status

A native bird, the crow has always been a common to abundant species in North Carolina. Since 1966, records show the population of the American crow as increasing slightly and steadily in the state and across the nation. Hundreds of thousands of crows roost and breed in North Carolina, and the bird presently is in no danger of becoming a species in need of protection.

Description

The American crow grows to be 17 to 21 inches long. It is several inches larger than the very similar fish crow, which is found in eastern North Carolina; but it is several inches smaller than the common raven, found in our mountains. It has a stout body, powerful wings, sturdy legs and a fan-shaped tail. Its feathers are a glossy black with reflections of steel-blue or deep purple, and its feet are well-adapted for walking. The crow’s scientific name, *brachyrhynchos*, means “short beaked.”

Habitat and Habits

American crows adapt to a vari-



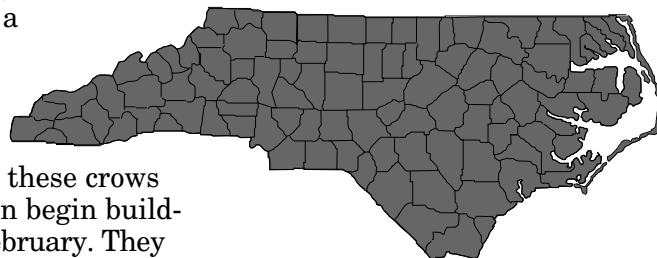
ety of habitats, appearing along highways, in suburbs, on farmland and in grassy areas. Typically, they prefer plowed fields and open spaces where they can feed. In winter, especially, thousands of these large, black birds roost in dense woods. But landfills, orchards and back yards often make prime habitats, as well.

It has been noted that when crows feed in the fields, a “guard” crow posts high off the ground to detect danger. Crows use their brash call—“caw, caw” or “aw, aw”—to communicate and warn other birds.

Bold and noisy while roosting and feeding, crows prefer quiet, secluded woods for nesting. They typically nest deep in forests with medium growth or thick stands of pines. Mating begins in early February. The male courts the female by spreading its wings and tail, fluffing its body feathers and bowing, of sorts, to the female. Sometimes a male can be seen soaring and diving in the air in pursuit of his mate. Once paired, these crows perch together, then begin building a nest in late February. They nest solitarily, one pair per a 100-acre lot.

Occasionally, crows raid other birds’ nests such as the red-tailed hawk or great horned owl; in turn, some smaller birds such as jays and grackles sometimes mob and chase crows.

American crows build their nests high, about 25 to 70 feet off the ground, on a large, horizontal limb. It takes the pair about five to 13 days to construct a heavy, compact nest of sticks and twigs lined with leaves, moss, bark, feathers and grass. The first clutches of four to six eggs are laid from early to mid-March. Both parents share in incubation and care of the young. After about 18 days, the pale blue or green eggs spotted with dark brown crack open and the hungry brood appears. The young remain in the nest about one month. By spring, the crows typically leave the nest to roost in the same general area.



Range Map:

Found statewide

Crows are diurnal birds and they spend much of their waking hours feeding. They typically eat vegetation such as corn, wheat, oats and wild berries. But they also feast on insects, garbage, crawfish, snakes, lizards, mice, rats, young rabbits and the eggs and young of other birds. Carrion feeders, crows can be seen in the mornings along the highway, feeding on rabbits, opossums and other animals killed by cars during the night. Fast and agile, they are adapting to the job once claimed by the larger, slower vulture.

Crows are also believed to be one of the most intelligent birds. Alert and aggressive, they deftly escape danger. And experience has shown that, if caught, they can easily be trained.

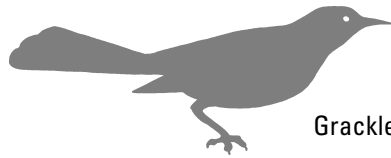
Range and Distribution

The American crow is common throughout the Carolinas during all seasons, but it does not breed in the higher elevations of the mountains. Populations in North Carolina generally rise in the winter, based on some migratory movement. The American crow can be found from Newfoundland south to Florida, Texas and California, but it is absent in parts of the desert southwestern United States.

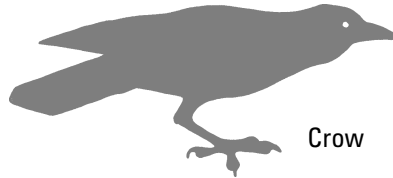
People Interactions

Crows and farmers have had a long-standing feud over cropland, especially corn fields. Measures to remove flocks of crows have ranged from a simple scarecrow to shooting, trapping and poisoning. Yet, crows can be beneficial by eating pests such as insects, mice, snakes and lizards. They also frequently feed on animals killed by the roadside. Highway construction has helped the crow in that respect.

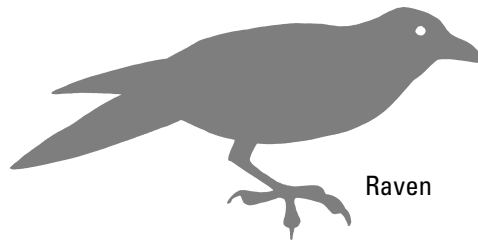
Years ago, people kept and trained crows as pets, but it is illegal in North Carolina now to take wild birds home. A limited season exists in the state for hunting crows.



Grackle



Crow



Raven

References

Potter, Eloise; James Parnell; Robert Teulings. *Birds of the Carolinas* (The University of North Carolina Press, 1980).

Green, Charlotte Hilton. *Birds of the South* (Dover Publications, Inc., 1975).

Credits

Written by Sarah Friday.

Illustrated by J.T. Newman.

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AMERICAN CROW

Classification

Class: Aves

Order: Passeriformes

Average Size

Length: 17 to 21 in.

Food

Omnivorous. Typically eats grains, berries, but also insects, snakes, young rabbits and other small animals. Carrion feeder.

Breeding

Mate in early February. Pair nests together through season, building a nest, incubating and caring for young. Nest solitarily.

Young

Clutch size is 4 to 6 eggs. Incubation period is about 18 days. Usually one brood per year. Young remain in nest about one month, then roost nearby.

Life Expectancy

Long-lived. Average 10 years.