

FEBRUARY 1-14, 2016 NATURAL HISTORY NOTES FOR EASTVIEW

By Dick Harlow

CORVIDS

There is no time like winter to bone up on ID characteristics!

Crows and Ravens represent the genus *Corvus*. Here in Vermont and especially here in Middlebury we have the three basic Corvids to observe or hear at different times throughout the year. Some are more notable when the voice is heard, others less because they are less frequent in our environs. But, still in a single year we could hear and possibly see all three.

How do you tell whether you are seeing or hearing an **American Crow**, a **Fish Crow**, or a **Common Raven**? If the raven and crow were together you would see the difference in body size and bill shape. If they are flying you might be able to distinguish them by whether they fan the tail or if it is squared off or not. But, I think it is relatively tough from a distance to know specifically which one you are looking at. If the bird is calling, then it is easier to know what you are seeing. When they sound off it makes all the difference in the world!



Common Raven, *Corvus corax* © Chuq Von Rospach

The **Common Raven, *Corvus corax***, is a large black bird with a heavy bill. Unless you are up close or using binoculars it is still tough, unless you have a good view of the bird. If it is flying you want to look for the wedge shaped tail and whether it soars, even does somersaults in the air. But, when they make their guttural *croak* call it is unmistakable what you are hearing. During the summer here at EastView, you will hear these *croaks* on occasion throughout the summer.

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Common Raven wedge shaped tail

© Stephanie Chang

The **American Crow**, *Corvus brachyrhynchos*, like many other Corvids is all black doesn't soar and has a fan shaped tail rather than wedge-shaped. Their call is a series of *caws* that are known well by many. American Crows are smart, say a lot, voice their *caws* in succession, and generally tend to talk back and forth either up close or from some distance. Even though you might see a single crow, many American Crows fly in small family groups or even in large numbers. Here in Middlebury we have many American Crows congregating in very large groups, 500-700 birds, during fall and winter as they leave and return to their roosts along Otter Creek.



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American Crow *Corvus brachyrhynchos*
with a fan shaped tail © Tim Knight

The **Fish Crow**, *Corvus ossifragus*, is another black bird, looking similar to an American Crow. I am not showing a picture because I am not convinced the images on the internet are good Fish Crow examples.

Fish Crows are more common in the south and extend up the East coast to MA and inland to Burlington, VT. There are subtle **differences** between the Fish Crow and the American Crow, but its call is unmistakable! You do not have to learn all the repertoires of these different Corvids to know what species you are hearing. The Fish Crow has an unmistakable **uh-uh** call. Just those two notes, heard while a large black bird is flying, you know you have heard a Fish Crow. It isn't a *caw, caw, caw, caw*, or a guttural *croak*, but just two notes of **uh-uh** or **uh-uhaa**. The sound or tenor of the call is also different from an American Crow. Once you have heard these two notes, just those two notes, you will never mistake it for anything but a Fish Crow. There is a small population of Fish Crows in Burlington, VT, but when I heard a Fish Crow calling over our South St. field this summer and fall, I felt that maybe the Burlington population is starting to expand. On the Middlebury Christmas Bird Count, our team was in NY along the coast of Lake Champlain, a Fish Crow was heard calling as it was flying along the shoreline. Maybe the Burlington population really is expanding.

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It would be greatly appreciated if you hear either the Raven or the Fish Crow that you would notify Dick Harlow at EastView and let him know date and place. Many thanks

SILENT SPRING REVISITED

In the 1940's I remember going to a large room in a building with many other children my age and being dusted with DDT. I didn't have a clue at that age; it was during WWII and we (and our parents) did what we were told.

In the 1950's I remember seeing convulsing robins on our front lawn and reading about DDT as a possible cause. Chemical companies were saying how important DDT was in killing Malarial carrying mosquitoes and other pests that might bring diseases to man and crops. How important DDT was during WWII in the Pacific keeping our fighting men safe from malaria, yellow fever, etc. All I saw were robins on our front lawn convulsing and dying. Why were we using this poison? Couldn't we be harmed as well as birds? Wasn't there another way to kill mosquitoes without harming robins?

2015 was the 50th anniversary of the publication of Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*.



I began teaching Biology in 1964. In 1965 Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* appeared in bookstores! In 1966 *Silent Spring* was required reading in my Biology class. That was more than 10 years from when I had watched robins dying on our front lawn. When I read *Silent Spring*, a very readable and enlightening book, I couldn't get over the fact that we, as a society, by allowing inorganic poisons in our

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environment, were on our way to devastating wildlife as we know it. Our myopic view of the environment, of our own backyard or of our farmland could cause irreparable damage to our environment. Didn't people understand that all life is interdependent? We have predator/prey relationships for a reason. We have birds that eat insects for survival. Without certain insects and their relationships with other organisms the system would be jeopardized. Consequently, the predators that depend on those prey items would be jeopardized. It seemed very logical to me that we needed to put a stop to spraying with DDT. I could go into greater detail about the problems this caused wildlife, but that will be for later notes.

Coincidentally, during this time, James Watson and Francis Crick had discovered the DNA molecule in the early 1950's, but its significance would take many more years to surface. Even though DDT was banned from being used in the US in 1972, other countries around the world were still using DDT along with other pesticides on their crops, animals and themselves. Not until rather recently did we understand the deleterious affect these insecticides have on our DNA let alone other animal and insect DNA.

I simply bring this up because, in my mind, *Silent Spring* was a milestone for citizen awareness. And, there was a reason Middlebury and our Board did not want to use inorganic poisons on our grounds here at EastView. I am sure there are some who still believe in the short sighted view that there is no better way to get rid of weeds or insects than to use inorganic herbicides and insecticides. It is a shame that there is the perception that science isn't putting more effort or pushing harder on finding organic, natural means of combating crop and disease infestations, e.g. crop rotation less monocultures. What we can do is to be as informed as possible so as to prevent the naysayers from circumventing the wishes of Act 250, Middlebury College and the original board of directors.

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Weather Tidbits

February Two Week Totals - February 1-14, 2016

All Measurements taken at solar noon (1230 EST).

PRECIPITATION

Total Precipitation: 15.4 mm or 0.6 inches

Precipitation includes rain and snow melt.

Snow Days: 4

Snowfall for February 1-14: 41.2 mm or 1.6 inches

Overcast Days: 7

WIND

Highest wind gust: February 1&3, 30 MPH, Direction: North

Average Wind speed for February 1-14: 4.2 mph,

Dominant Wind Direction: North

Days w/wind gusts 20-30 MPH: 5 Days w/wind gusts >30 MPH: 2

TEMPERATURE

Mean Temp: -4.9 C⁰/23.2°F

High Temp: 22.2 C⁰/72 °F

Low Temp: -29.2 C⁰/-20.6°F

DAYS OF:

Max. Temp. 0.0 C⁰/32°F: 7 days

Min. Temp. 0.0 C⁰/32°F: 14 days

Min. Temp.: -18 C⁰/-0.4°F: 4 days