CORVUS CORAX, Linn.

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Raven.

Corvus corax, Linn. Faun. Suec., p. 29.

—— *maximus*, Scopoli.

—— *clericus*, Sparrm. Mus. Carls., tab. 2.

—— *leucophæus*, Vieill. Gal. des Ois., tom. i. p. 155, pl. 100.

THE *Corvidæ* (Ravens, Crows, Rooks, and Daws) are very widely distributed over the globe; but there are certain portions of it in which they are never found: thus, in the Old World, none occur in New Zealand, nor, I believe, in Polynesia, and, in the New, none south of Mexico. This well-marked family of birds has been divided into several genera, by the separation of the Rooks and Daws from the Ravens and Crows, and again from each other; but, for myself, I prefer retaining them all under the old generic name of *Corvus*.

It is the prevailing opinion among ornithologists that our Raven is not so ubiquitous as it was formerly supposed to be, and that the American and Thibetan species, hitherto regarded as identical with it, are distinct; but the settlement of the question is of no moment in connexion with the history of the Raven *par excellence*.

The range of the *Corvus corax* is said to extend eastward to the Punjaub and Afghanistan. It is also abundant in Palestine and Asia Minor, throughout the length of the Atlas range in North Africa, and all parts of Central Europe, even as far north as the Quickiock Fells in Lapland, and beyond this to the North Cape. It is also found in Siberia, and in Iceland is abundant and stationary. In the British Islands it was formerly far more numerous than it is now. The keepers, of course, are its most deadly enemies; for although many of them are deterred by the superstitions connected with this "bird of ill omen" from shooting it, they relieve their consciences by laying in its way a strychnined rabbit, which it eats, and either tumbles over on the spot or flies to the nearest water to slake its burning thirst, and there ceases to live, leaving its body to be devoured by a gull, a fox, or a hungry dog, which in its turn falls a victim to the virulence of the poison. I have undoubted evidence that this is often done in Cornwall, and I believe that the practice also prevails in other counties. Time was when every rocky headland had its pair of Ravens living in harmony with the Peregrine and the Sea-Eagle; and this is still the case on the rugged coasts of Ireland, the western part of Scotland, and the Hebrides. At St. Kilda, it still holds its own with the Eagle and the Falcon. The Raven does not, however, confine its breeding-haunts to rocks, nor always rear its young amid the din of the thousand voices of sea-birds. The "Raven tree" still stands in many of our inland counties; and on it the bird occasionally places its nest. In other countries its habits are precisely similar to those seen in our own; but in Palestine, as we learn from Mr. Tristram, it also breeds on the mosque and ruined towers. Although at the breeding-season only a solitary pair are to be found in any given locality, there are times when several in small flocks, and several together, may be observed in company winging their way home to their roosting-places, like the gregarious Rook. If brought up from the nest, it bears confinement apparently with pleasure and contentment; for individuals have been known to spend the whole of their time from year's end to year's end (I might almost say from century to century, so long-lived is the bird) in some brewer's yard, or about the premises of a country inn. Here it sits about on any little eminence, croaks out its harsh note at strangers, gives battle to stray dogs, catches weakly sparrows, rats, and mice (and ducklings and young chickens, if not defended by their mothers), observes, apparently with interest, all that is going on, and becomes completely one of the establishment. In a state of nature, on the other hand, they are shy, mistrustful, and not easily approached. In the air their actions are playful, and their evolutions highly graceful and interesting, sometimes circling at an immense height, at others chasing and dipping after each other like Rooks when presaging wind. Those who have witnessed these aerial evolutions, the flight of a pair in pursuit of their prey over the mountain-side, or their apparently playful tiltings with the Eagle, cannot but have admired their sweeping and graceful motions; at all events, mine were feelings of delight when watching them with never-tiring eyes. The Duke of Argyll, whose powers of observation are of the keenest, and whose opinion may always be relied upon, saw, at Inverary, a Raven sporting about in the air, with something strange in its bill, which, after a time, it let fall to the ground. On examination, it proved to be the expanded cone of a silver fir. However singular this freak of the bird may have been, it was attended with a circumstance of no ordinary interest; for the cone was covered with a parasitic plant (*Pheltonites strobilina*) so extremely rare that few botanists possess it, and there was not a specimen in the British Museum until, the Duke having kindly presented the cone to me, I transferred it, with the rare fungus still attached, to the national collection.

From time immemorial the Raven's croak has been supposed to predict a death; and many a timid family has been rendered melancholy by the sound of its hoarse voice in the neighbourhood of their dwelling during the sickness of one of its inmates.

"As doth the Raven o'er the infected house,
Boding to all." *Othello*, Act iv. Sc. i.

. "Ravens

Fly o'er our heads and downward look on us.

As we were sickly prey." *Julius Cæsar*, Act v. Sc. 3.

"Some powerful spirit instruct the Kites and Ravens
To be thy nurses." *Winter's Tale*, Act ii. Sc. 3.

The Raven is omnivorous, and will eat grain, fruit, and berries, maritime and inland worms, mollusks of the salt and fresh waters, dead fish, and carrion of all kinds, young hares and rabbits, eggs and young birds (both those which breed on the ground and those which rest among the rocks; and a dead cetacean cast on the shore becomes the point of attraction to all the Ravens in the neighbourhood.

The Raven breeds very early—the nest being prepared in February, and the young hatched by the end of March. Now he seeks his prey on the sea-sides or the margins of estuaries and lochs, or resorts to fields for worms like the Common Crow and the Rook. Shepherds tell us that a number of Ravens will combine and take out the eyes of a cast sheep, and that sickly lambs are sure to be attacked unless they are carefully looked after.

Dr. Lawrence Edmonstone has given some interesting details respecting the bird as seen in Shetland, and some curious information respecting the use to which it was put by the ancient Scandinavian mariners. It not only served them as a nautical pioneer, but the Raven was the sacred standard of the great Odin: for these particulars, however, I must refer my readers to Macgillivray's 'History of British Birds,' vol. iii. pp. 712, etc.

After alluding to the persecuted life led by the Raven in this country, Mr. Hewitson states that "in Norway, where the feathered tribes are loved and cherished, they so abound that we at one time counted as many as eighteen together. There they are pert and confident, and would frequently remain quietly seated till we had passed them at the distance of a few yards. On one island we saw several of their nests in a large sepulchral-looking cave, peculiarly suitable to the residence of birds which in some districts are regarded as of ill omen. At home the Raven breeds in the most wild and inaccessible districts, building its nest for the most part in the steepest cliffs upon the sea-coast, sometimes, when inland, upon lofty trees. They have for a great many years been known to breed in the Mausoleum at Castle Howard, in Yorkshire. The nest is large, and composed of sticks plastered together with mud, and lined with a quantity of roots, wool, and the fur of animals. The eggs are four or five in number, and are subject to much variety,—some being of a dark greenish olive, blotched all over with irregular and various-sized marks of dark brown; while others are of a pale greenish blue, streaked all over, but particularly at the larger end, with pale red; and between these there are two or three varieties, some being distinctly and more sparingly spotted, and resembling somewhat the eggs of the Jackdaw.

"Mr. Newton has sent me the following graphical notes:—'A pair of these birds breed annually in the neighbourhood of Elveden Hall, in Norfolk. When undisturbed they have usually refurnished their last year's nest, always lining it neatly with rabbits' down. It is built on one of several lofty Scotch fir trees standing far out on a heath. The number of eggs laid is generally five, but I have known them to be content with four, while six were once deposited. While the hen is sitting, the actions of the male bird are well worth watching. He dashes indiscriminately at any bird that approaches, be it Stock-Dove or Peregrine Falcon, and, when the intruder has been utterly routed, shoots back to the nest, celebrating his victory by a sonorous croak, turning as he utters it completely on his back—an action which does not, however, in the least degree impede his onward career. He then resumes his look-out station on one of the highest boughs, perhaps leaving it again at the expiration of a few minutes to repel another invasion.'"

In the Faroe Islands and in Iceland the Raven is subject to variety, and many pied examples are met with: these were considered to be by Vieillot distinct, and named by him *leucophæus*; but they must only be regarded as varieties.

The accompanying figure represents a male about two-thirds of the natural size, on a branch of the spruce-fir (*Abies excelsior*).

Gould, John. 1873. "Raven, *Corvus corax* [Pl. 57]." *The birds of Great Britain* 3, –.
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