CORVUS CORONE, Linn.

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Carrion-Crow.

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

——— *cornix*, Leach, Syst. Cat. of Indig. Mamm. and Birds in Coll. Brit. Mus., p. 18.

——— *subcorone* et *C. hiemalis*, Brehm, Vög. Deutschl., p. 167.

Corone subcorone, Kaup, Naitrl. Syst., p. 99.

“BLACK as a Crow” is very descriptive of this well-known British bird; for it has none of the fine play of colours observable in the Rook; still some parts of its plumage are slightly glossed with purple and green, particularly the upper surface. In size and general appearance, when in the air, the two birds are so much alike that it requires a practised eye to distinguish one from the other; this difficulty, however, disappears when two freshly killed birds are laid side by side, for many unmistakable differences in their structure and plumage are then apparent. The Rook has a more lengthened, pointed, and adze-shaped bill than the Crow, and, except during the first year of its existence, has the nostrils and throat devoid of feathers, allowing the scurfy, greyish white skin to appear, while in the Crow the same parts are clothed with feathers at all times. In their disposition, habits, and economy, also, great dissimilarity exists.

The Rook is a sociable fearless creature, which courts rather than shuns the presence of man, as is shown by its selecting the trees around his mansion whereon to assemble in vast numbers at the close of day, and often breeding in close proximity, the assemblage of its great nests forming a conspicuous feature in the landscape. It is also less predatory, living principally upon worms and grubs, and, moreover, is highly gregarious, being often seen in large, and frequently in enormous gatherings, particularly in winter. The Crow, on the other hand, is a prowling marauder, prone to evil doings, shy and distrustful, builds a more concealed nest near the bole of an elm, an oak, or on a spreading branch of a large Scotch fir, nearly if not always in some central part of the park, where the sitting bird can see all around and escape from any threatened danger, and does not depend upon worms and grubs for its existence, but will readily attack a stranded sheep or peck to death a leveret or a Grouse. The Crow, too, commences breeding in February, which is a month earlier than the Rook and two months prior to the Daw, from each of which, as well as from the Raven and the Chough, it differs in the tone of its voice and in the hoarseness of its call.

The distribution of the Crow over our islands may be said to be very general in England and the southern parts of Scotland, whether it be along the flat muddy shores of the sea or the park- and forest-lands of the interior; in the middle and northern parts of Scotland it is very uncommon; and it appears to be entirely absent from the Orkneys and Shetlands, for it is not included in the late Mr. Dunn’s list of the birds observed by him in those islands; and in Ireland it is much less frequently seen than with us. On the continent of Europe the Crow is found in all the middle, southern, and western countries, but gradually becomes more scarce as we advance towards the north; according to Temminck it is entirely absent from Sweden and Norway, and is rare in Denmark. It occurs in Algeria; but I am not aware of its having been found in South Africa; Mr. Tristram states that it does not occur in Palestine. Mr. Jerdon has included it in the birds of India on the authority of Dr. Adams, who also states that it is common in Cashmere; and Mr. Swinhoe secured one of two examples seen by him on Naochow, a small island lying off the right of the peninsula of Luichow, in China.

Some extremely curious habits have been attributed to the Crow by various writers, a few of whose statements are sufficiently interesting to warrant their being reprinted here.

St. John, in his ‘Tour in Sutherland,’ says:—“Amongst the curious instincts which birds display in providing themselves with food, the one most resembling reason is that which teaches the common Crow, on finding on the shore a shell containing fish, to fly with it to a height in the air, and then to let it drop, in order to break the shell sufficiently to get at the animal enclosed in it. When the shell does not break the first time the Crow drops it, she darts down, picks it up, and ascends still higher, till she perceives that the height is sufficient for her purpose. Sometimes another Crow darts in to carry off the booty, upon which a battle ensues in the air.

“The Crows collect great numbers of sea-shells on particular favourite hillocks, which are often at some distance from the sea. I have frequently observed in this country great collections of this kind; and, from the state of the shells, it would appear that they bring them to the same place for many successive years.”

Some part of this account is confirmed by the observation of Lord Hill, who tells me that, at Hawkstone, the Crows frequently take the mussels from the lake-side, mount with them into the air, and drop them on the hard road, never on the grass.

Notwithstanding what I have said as to the unsociable nature of the Crow, I had frequent opportunities of observing small parties passing over the park at Tregothnan to roost in the great woods of Talverne, ever and anon uttering their hoarse croaking call.

Although large trees in parks and inclosures are usually the places in which the Crow constructs its nest, of sticks strongly cemented together with clay, and lined first with roots and then with quantities of wool, fur of animals, and other soft materials to the extent of two or three inches in thickness, the bird experiences no difficulty in constructing it of different materials in other situations, of which I find the following remarkable instance in Mr. Hewitson's interesting 'Coloured Illustrations of the Eggs of British Birds,' 3rd edition, vol. i. p. 223:—"In 1832 a pair of these birds took a singular fancy into their heads; deserting the habits of their forefathers and the society of their species, they repaired to one of the Fern Islands to breed, apparently thus subjecting themselves to very great inconvenience. Contrary to their usual habits they built their nest upon the ground, there being no trees on the islands. It was of most curious construction; and instead of sticks (of which it is in other instances composed, and which the neighbourhood would not supply), the outside was formed of small pieces of turf, neatly laid upon each other and formed into a compact wall; the space within was lined with a quantity of wool, which was all brought from the mainland, a distance of four or five miles." The bird will also just as readily avail itself of the ledge of a rock or any projection on a cliff-side.

Its food is much more varied than might be inferred from what has been said above, its omnivorous appetite inducing it to devour worms, snails, crustaceans, portions of dead fish or other garbage thrown up by the tide; neither does it object to the farmer's beans and potatoes or the gardener's walnuts and fruits, provided its pilfering can be carried on without a chance of detection. In its approach to the field and the garden, it exhibits much craft and caution; and the keeper, who is the Crow's deadliest enemy, has to exercise all his skill and cunning to circumvent this wary bird; a few eggs, however, or a dead rabbit placed beside a hidden trap, are irresistible temptations and often lead him to destruction. For the sake of showing this mode of capture I have in this instance gone a little out of my way, and represented in the accompanying Plate a bird in a difficulty from which he could never extricate himself. Sympathy he may obtain from his partner, to whom he has probably been united from the attainment of maturity; but assistance she cannot render him. If the Crow can be tempted to put his toes on the trap his doom is sealed, as it also is when he partakes of the strychnined piece of flesh which the keeper purposely lays for him.

The eggs are usually four or five in number, of a pale bluish green, spotted and speckled with two shades of ash-colour and dove-brown; but they vary much in the depth of the colouring, some being deeply and others lightly tinted; occasionally they are light blue, unspotted, but marked here and there with under-tints of grey. They are one inch and eight lines by one inch and two lines in diameter.

The male feeds and spiritedly defends the female while sitting; and both bravely repel birds much larger than themselves (such as the Raven, the Kite, and the Buzzard) which may appear to have any evil designs upon their young.

Waterton states that the Carrion-Crow carries off eggs not in the bill, but on the point of it, after having thrust the upper mandible through the shell; both Macgillivray and Thompson, however, give an instance each in which, upon the bird being alarmed, the egg when found was still whole.

A number of interesting anecdotes respecting the cunning and predaceous habits of this bird will be found in the various works on British Birds; but I have probably said enough respecting a species so well known to every one. I must not, however, omit to mention that, according to Mr. Hogg, it may be easily tamed, and then becomes strongly attached to the person who rears it, but is apt to peck severely any one else who attempts to meddle with it.

The sexes are alike in colour; but the female is somewhat smaller than her mate. The young are like the adults, except that they have less of the metallic lustre on the upper surface.

In case ornithologists should desire to institute a comparison of the size of the European Crow with the Crows of other countries, I append the careful admeasurements of a fine old male, taken early in February, 1870:—

Total length $17\frac{1}{2}$ inches, bill $2\frac{3}{8}$, wing $11\frac{3}{4}$, tail $7\frac{1}{2}$, tarsi $2\frac{3}{8}$.

The figures are rather under the natural size. The flower is the common red poppy (*Papaver Rhæas*, Linn.).

Gould, John. 1873. "Carrion-Crow, *Corvus corone* [Pl. 58]." *The birds of Great Britain* 3, -. <https://doi.org/10.5962/p.323946>.

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