

Raven and crow numbers grow in Marin, bring environmental problems



A raven brave rain and high winds at a Vista Point overlooking the Golden Gate Bridge. Frankie Frost — Marin Independent Journal

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ravens vs. crows

Ravens and crows are cousins in the corvid family, but can be hard to tell apart. Ravens are considerably larger than crows, have thicker beaks and have beard-like tufts of feathers around their throats. Ravens also have deep croaking voices and often travel with a mate.

Crows tend to be more numerous, gather in larger groups and have a higher-pitched caw. A crow's tail is shaped like a fan, while the raven's tail appears wedge-shaped.

It's not exactly "The Birds," but a proliferation of native ravens and crows in Marin and around the state has some environmentalists concerned about damage to the ecosystem because of the smart, rugged and cunning corvids.

Crows and ravens were once rare in California's urban areas, but now appear everywhere, often flourishing on human subsidies of garbage, food and water, experts say.

"Ravens and crows are predatory on other species," said Lawrence Alioto, executive director for the San Anselmo-based [Coalition for a Balanced Environment](#). "Some of those species, like the snowy plovers, are endangered. It's really a human-created problem because they have thrived on water sources, landfills and trash that we have created."

Alioto's group is calling for local and regional health departments to enforce existing laws requiring closed waste containers, which would reduce food sources.

Ravens are at least partly to blame for a downturn in great white egrets that came to Picher Canyon near Bolinas for decades. In 2013 they stopped coming, with ravens partially playing a role in making life uncomfortable in the canyon as their numbers grew.

Also in Marin, the ravens pose a threat to the plovers, California least terns and marbled murrelets, all endangered. Those and other species have been bullied by the corvids, whose numbers have grown wildly since the 1970s.

"The populations have gone through the roof," said Thomas Gardali, ecologist with Point Blue Conservation Science, the former Point Reyes Bird Observatory. "They have really done well in human-built environments, from finding food in Dumpsters to nesting in trees that were once not there, and even nesting in power lines. We have altered the landscape and they benefitted."

Southern Marin Audubon Bird Counts from 1975 through 1983 logged the number of ravens under 100. From 1984 to 1998 the number went as high as 228, and no lower than 100. From 1999 through 2009 the highest county was 326, and no lower than 193. Raven sightings were almost unheard of outside Marin until the 1990s, but Audubon volunteers around the greater Bay Area now count hundreds of them each year.

Crow numbers in Marin went from 170 in 1975 to 1,693 by 2009 and that number is likely growing, said Barbara Salzman, president of Marin Audubon.

"There are a lot more crows over the last five years," said Salzman, who lives in Larkspur. "They are all around my house to a point where you don't see many other types of birds. They are colonials so you hear them at night calling to each other."

Both species are protected by the federal Migratory Bird Act, which prevents them from being killed. Ravens and crows were added in the early 1970s, which may account for the species' growth spurt.

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As cousins in the corvid family, ravens and crows can be hard to tell apart at first glance. But ravens are considerably larger than crows, sport thicker beaks and have beard-like tufts of feathers around their throats. Ravens also have deep croaking voices, while crows have a higher-pitched caw.

The birds also have distinct social lives. Ravens usually live alone or in mated pairs, while crows are more sociable, often living in large family groups in which elder siblings help parents care for younger chicks.

Both are said to be smart birds that can figure out ways to get into garbage bins and even plot strategies, such as placing nuts in areas on a road where cars will run over and open them.

"I surf sometimes at Drakes Beach and the ravens will watch me as I walk in with a backpack," Gardali said with a laugh. "As soon as I get in the water they will come down and start trying to get into my pack. It's amazing. They are very smart."

Added Alioto: "They never forget a face."

What can be done?

“We can keep garbage cans closed tight in our parks and at home and we shouldn’t leave dog food out because the birds will eat it,” Gardali said. “But their numbers are probably going to go higher no matter what.”