



Common Crow

Fred Lahrman

DO CROWS SAY CAW?

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It is a commonplace that crows say "caw". Thus Taverner says nothing of the voice of our Common Crow but merely to its "familiar voice."¹² Early, Chapman includes the voice as one of its traits which "make the crow the 'best of our birds.'" The voice is a "loud, open caw," he says, and he aptly has listened to it carefully, "and distinguishes this sound from that made by another member of the Corvidae family, the Fish Crow."³ Others made the same distinction and still described the Common Crow's voice as "caw", "cah" or "ca-

and, since that time, to some other bird watchers. Upon close listening, they have agreed with what I have heard. Meanwhile, because I grew up on a farm and continue to live there each summer, I have had ample opportunity to continue to hear crows cawing—or, rather, "awing."

A few years ago I spent a good part of an afternoon playing and replaying Band 1, Side 4 of *A Field Guide to Western Bird Songs*⁶ to someone with a trained musical ear. Although we played the record at various speeds, neither of us could hear the initial c of the crow's caw.

In trouble with this commonplace from my childhood, some 35 years ago, I could never once hear a crow say caw. To my ear it says "aw" with an explosive initial vowel, it is "aw", but the c is just not present. I mentioned this fact to one of my deschool teachers in the 1940's

Lately I have been examining again the comments about crows in present-day bird guides. My own observations (that is, auditions) seem to receive little support. Peterson says crows make a "loud caw or cah or kahr, easily imitated"⁸; Pough speaks of their "ca-ah, ca-ah, ca-ah" known



Migrating crows

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by everyone¹⁰; and Godfrey writes of their "familiar caw."⁵

Even authors concerned solely with bird songs refer to crows' cawing in a similar manner. Although Mathews takes pains to shatter one commonplace about crows (that their color is *not* black but rather an iridescent steel-blue!) he hears their cry—whether it be a "cr-r-r-r-r-uck," a "caw, caw, caw," or a "ca-cak-ca-

caw"—always beginning with consonant c. He then gives musical notation of these calls on a treble clef.

In another such study Arms cites the mimic qualities of our Old World cousins, the Carrion Crow, the Hooded Crow, and the Raven. These birds, according to Peter Mountfort and Hollom, have calls of "kraa" or "kaw."⁹ Since

start with a k-sound, could it be possible that when immigrants came to our land and first saw our native crow they simply assumed, or hearing that it too said a kind of caw?

Of course, crows are quite capable of saying caw. Forbush and May have pointed out that crows have the tenor of a singer and so can produce a variety of sounds, including a dog's barking, a hen's squawk, or a rooster's crowing.⁴ Bent refers to their "superior imitative faculties" and their ability to mimic human sounds.² Many farm boys, indeed, have had crows that could talk. And talking crows, or their relatives, have become a part of our folklore—from "The Two Ravens" of the medieval English and who discuss their plans to pick up the bones of knights slain in battle—to the crows, three in number at a time, of the toned-down American folksong "Billy Magee Caw," where the birds choose to caw on a slain horse. Here the birds say caw three times before repeating the horse's title. Certainly, crows can imitate a caw as well as human speech.

Bent goes on to quote several representative authors in order to give us a well-rounded concept of crows' cawing.² Again, the writers have listened closely, for we learn from Allen about the rhythm of the crow's caw; from Wright about the times of first being voiced each morning; from Hoffmann, Knight, and Forbush about the accents placed on various syllables to indicate the meaning of that syllable. Only Townsend, writing originally in 1923, speaks of such modifications of the crow's call: "caw, caw, orr, orr" and "ou, ahh, ahh, ahh," which he notes with my own experience. Townsend continues: "The conversational notes of a small group or flock of Crows are always interesting, and the observer is impressed by the extensiveness of their vocabulary and the variations in their notes."

Now that the Common Crow is with us in numbers once more at the end of this summer season, the ears of the *Blue Jay* might well be again with fresh ears to what the

bird is in fact saying, keeping in mind that

To be a fine student of ornithology
And study our crows and their philology
Is to listen to them caw,
To oneself say, "Ah-hah!
This subject is surely one of phonology."

If crows normally do utter both a caw and an aw, which call is the more prevalent?

¹ARMSTRONG, E. A. 1973. A study of bird song. Dover, New York, (pp. 81, 83, 110).

²BENT, A. C. 1964. Life histories of North American jays, crows, and titmice, part II. Dover, New York (republication of U.S. Nat. Mus. Bull. 191), (pp. 247-249).

³CHAPMAN, F. M. 1966. Handbook of birds of eastern North America. Dover, New York, (pp. 391-392).

⁴FORBUSH, E. H., and J. B. MAY, 1939. A natural history of American birds of eastern and central North America. Houghton Mifflin, Boston, (pp. 344-345).

⁵GODFREY, W. E. 1966. The birds of Canada. Nat. Mus. of Canada Bull. 203, Ottawa, (p. 275). (428 pp.).

⁶Laboratory of Ornithology, Cornell University. 1962. A field guide to western bird songs (3 records). Houghton Mifflin, Boston.

⁷MATHEWS, F. S. 1967. Field book of wild birds and their music. Dover, New York, (p. 47).

⁸PETERSON, R. T. 1961. A field guide to western birds. Houghton Mifflin, Boston, (p. 210). (366 pp.).

⁹PETERSON, R. T., G. MOUNTFORT, and P. A. D. HOLLAND (n.d.) A field guide to the birds of Britain and Europe. Houghton Mifflin, Boston, (pp. 197, 200, 202).

¹⁰POUGH, R. H. 1949. Audubon land bird guide. Doubleday, Garden City, N.Y., (p. 87). (312 pp.).

¹¹SAUNDERS, A. A. 1951. A guide to bird songs. Doubleday, Garden City, (p. 105). (307 pp.).

¹²TAVERNER, P. A. 1938. Birds of Canada. Musson, Toronto, (p. 307). (446 pp.).