

# CROWS AND THEIR (C)AWING

VICTOR C. FRIESEN, Box 65, Rosthern, Saskatchewan. S0K 3R0

It is now 14 years since I first published an article on what the call of the American Crow normally is.<sup>5</sup> To my ear it seemed to be *aw*, rather than *caw*. Ensuing correspondence and conversation with other birdwatchers (or birdlisteners) indicated that at least some of them were of similar opinion.

Of the 14 authorities cited in that article, however, almost all referred to the bird's familiar *caw*. Only one, Townsend in Bent,<sup>1</sup> spoke of possible modifications beginning with a vowel, such as *orr*, *ou* or *ahh*. (It is recognized, of course, that crows are great mimics and can produce a variety of sounds. This article is concerned with their usual call.)

Meanwhile, I have continued to listen to the crow's call and to see what additional authors, past and present, have written about it. Seton, in his story "Silver-spot," detailed the various calls of a specific crow – with actual musical notes on ten different treble clefs – and most of them are *caw* and all begin with *C*.<sup>14</sup> Gladden (in Pearson) writes also of the bird's *caw* and quotes two earlier writers, poet James Russell Lowell and naturalist John Burroughs, for supporting descriptions.<sup>13</sup> Blanchan, too, writes of its "*caw, caw, caw* for friend and foe alike."<sup>2</sup>

Cruikshank repeats the triplet, *caw-caw-caw*, and comments that it is "well known."<sup>4</sup> Similarly, Pettingill in Wetmore uses the threefold *caw* description – and that from a long and affectionate study, for he writes: "Possibly the liking for ... crows in my youth has influenced

my regard for them as an ornithologist... I am among their staunchest champions."<sup>16</sup>

Stokes also refers to the crow's *caw* as "normal," but he adds: "The great variety of other sounds that crows make cannot be sufficiently distinguished in this book to enable the reader to identify them in the field. It is still questionable how many distinct calls there are and how much of a difference among calls is due to individual variation."<sup>15</sup>

Despite all the unanimous expertise, again – as in my previous article – I did find one author who speaks of a crow's call in line with my own experience. For this, it was necessary to go back to the turn of the century, to a once-discredited naturalist who wrote about 30 popular books on wildlife. A sometime woodsman, living in the wilderness for a month or two each year and observing the birds and mammals there, his name was Dr. William J. Long.

Apparently, the censure, in part, stemmed from his noting things that at least some others deemed incredible. Burroughs wrote a famous article, pooh-poohing these stories and describing similar authors (E.T. Seton included) as nature fakers.<sup>3</sup> [Ed. note: see Friesen's book review in this issue.] Yet, a half century later, some of Long's articles were considered worthy enough to be collected again and republished.<sup>10,11</sup> (And one incident with a bullfrog catching a swallow and eating it<sup>9</sup> – was more or less substantiated in a work already cited: Wetmore describes a further inci-





Crow

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dent with bullfrogs capturing small birds and has the backing of the National Geographic Society in publishing it.<sup>16)</sup>

Throughout an article entitled "Crowways," Long refers to the crow's call as a hawing and uses the phrases such as "the loud chorus of *haw-haws*," "*hawing* vigorously," and "*Haw! haw!*"<sup>8</sup> Such description would be in keeping with my own auditions, for the inclusion of an aspirate *h* would be somewhat equivalent to the explosive initial vowel which I hear.

In another article, "Crow Talk," Long explains his use of *haw* – and what he believes is other writers' use of the more common *caw*: "Although by *habit* [this author's italics] one writes *caw* or *haw*, the sound is purely vowel, sometimes like *a* as in 'far', or again like *au* as in 'maul'." This is the most direct corroborating statement of my view that I have found. That is, we say crows *caw*, but what they say is *aw*. (Cf. our description of an owl's call: we say an owl hoots, but what it says is *hoo*.)

And yet there may be another factor at play here. The crow's first cousin, the

Common Raven utters a *kwawk*.<sup>6</sup> My wife, Dorothy, suggested to me that possibly the crow also sometimes concludes its *caw* with a *k* sound, however faintly, so that on hearing its familiar triad call, our ear transposes a final *k* to an initial position. Then *aw(k)-aw(k)-aw(k)* becomes the generally accepted *caw*.

To check out this supposition, we played Band 1, Side 4, of *A Field Guide to Western Bird Songs* to hear whether the crow's call incorporated a *c* sound at all and, if so, whether it was initial or final.<sup>7</sup> The record runs at 33 $\frac{1}{3}$  rpm, but the player has an adjustment for a speed of 16 rpm. Playing the record at the slower speed was revealing. Of the two calls recorded, the first series of seven more rapid *caws* proved to be (to our ears) a set of *awhks*, the final consonant sound being somewhat between an *h* and a *k*. The second series of three slower (*c*)*aws* were just *aws*. Seemingly, when we hear crows in the wild, we tend to hear what we are conditioned or expected to hear.

This article can only conclude as did the previous one on crows' *cawing*<sup>5</sup>: with an appeal to readers of *Blue Jay* to

listen again with fresh ears to what the bird is in fact saying – and with another limerick to keep in mind while doing the listening:

*Corvus brachyrhychos* said Ah –  
Its listeners assumed it a *caw*,  
They wrote it down thus,  
Without any fuss,  
And it was accepted as law!

1. BENT, A. C. 1964. Life histories of North American jays, crows, and titmice, part II. Dover, New York. 495 pp.
2. BLANCHAN, N. 1917. Birds. Doubleday, Doran, Garden City, NY. 257 pp.
3. BURROUGHS, J. 1903. Real and sham history. Atlantic Monthly, 91:298-309.
4. CRUIKSHANK, A. D. 1953. A pocket guide to birds. Simon and Schuster, Richmond Hill, ON. 216 pp.
5. FRIESEN, V. C. 1977. Do crows say *caw*? *Blue Jay* 35: 35-37.
6. GODFREY, W. E. 1966. The birds of Canada. Natl. Mus. Nat. Sci., Ottawa. 428 pp.
7. LABORATORY OF ORNITHOLOGY, CORNELL UNIVERSITY. 1962. A field guide to western bird songs. Houghton Mifflin, Boston. 3 records.
8. LONG, W. J. 1899. Ways of wood folk. Ginn, Boston. 205 pp.
9. ——— 1900. Wilderness ways. Ginn, Boston. 4 pp.
10. ——— 1956. The spirit of the wild. Doubleday, Garden City, NY. 256 pp.
11. ——— 1957. Wings of the forest. Doubleday, Garden City, NY. 239 pp.
12. LUTTS, R. H. 1990. The nature fakers. Fulcrum, Golden, Co. 255 pp.
13. PEARSON, T. G., et al. 1936. Birds of America. Garden City Books, Garden City, NY. 3 vols., 272 pp., 271 pp., 289 pp.
14. SETON, E. T. 1977 (originally published in 1898). Wild animals I have known. McClelland and Stewart, Toronto. 298 pp.
15. STOKES, D. W. 1979. A guide to the behaviour of common birds. Little, Brown, Toronto. 336 pp.
16. WETMORE, A., et al. 1964. Song and garden birds of North America. National Geographic Society, Washington, D.C. 400 pp.



There is a legend about the kingfisher. It seems that Alcyone, the daughter of Aeolus, grieving for her husband who had been shipwrecked, threw herself into the sea, where she was changed by the gods into a kingfisher, called halcyon by the Latins. Pliny says:

“The Halcyons lay their eggs and sit about mid-winter when the daies be short; and the times while they are broodies is called the Halcyon daies; for during that season the sea is calm and navigable.”

The belief was that the seven days preceding the winter solstice were used for building the nest and the days immediately following for laying and hatching the eggs. These were called the “halcyon days” and even now in the Mediterranean countries they are a time of picnics and outings along the beaches, on quiet streams, or in the woods and fields. Leonard Hall, 1958. *Stars upstream*. University of Chicago.