

Something to Crow About

This week, I'd like to share a question/answer column from David Hubbard, Regional Extension Agent for Forestry, Wildlife and Natural Resource Management that will give you 'something to crow about.'

Question: We seem to be seeing more and more crows in our neighborhood. They also seem to be less afraid when confronted. What's the deal?

Response: A quick answer to your question is the crows are feeding on grubs, caterpillars, army worms and other insects that are abundant during this time of year. You mentioned the population increase and yes, you are correct. In the last 30 – 40 years, crows have decided that roosting in cities or towns are more to their liking than roosting in the country.

Why this is happening is still being debated by the scientific community, but from a layman's point of view it seems logical that having fewer predators and not having to go nearly so far to get to the grocery store makes good sense.

Speaking of good sense, most experts believe the crow to be among the most intelligent and social of all of our American birds. Crows have even been observed making tools out of twigs and leaves to catch their own insects. Unlike most birds, they plan ahead by hiding food and coming back later for a meal.

Crows are actually very interesting to read and learn about. They tend to mate for life and the offspring spend up to 5 to 7 years in the family unit helping to do family chores like babysitting subsequent nestlings and teaching learned parenting skills. If crows make it through their first year, they live a long time, often 17 years or more. Normally, you will see several family groups in your backyard with the average family size being about 6 to 9 crows. All of these families roost in large groups as protection from predators.

Crows work together and have figured out there is power in numbers when it comes to threatening predators or another of their own kind trying to move into their territory. They are alerted by sound by one member and come together to form a "mob" to take care of business. That "caw-caw" sound that we associate with the crow is just one of many (up to 25) rattles, clicks and bell-like tones they use to communicate with each other.

A single family of crows can consume 40,000 grubs, caterpillars, army worms and other insects in one season. While crows are known and/or hated because of their cornfield prowess, one needs to understand that corn or grain makes up only a small percentage of their diet. The good they do by eating harmful insect pests normally offsets corn crop damage.

Believe it or not, crows are actually good citizens of their ecosystem. They transport and store seed that contributes to the maintenance and renewal of our forests, which helps lots of things with soil erosion near the top of the list. Crows are also near the top of the list of nature's cleanup crews as it relates to their habit of eating carrion (road kill).

For those in urban America who tend to have negative thoughts about crows and feel they are strictly a nuisance that needs to be eradicated because they make too much noise and too much mess, we may want to revisit this and weigh the pros and cons.

While I could continue with many more facts about this intelligent bird that we have criticized forever, I think I have "crowed" enough. We may not be ready for a "Thank You, Mr. Crow

Day,” but hopefully we can educate ourselves into knowing that crows play a more important role than we thought when it comes to our environmental concerns.