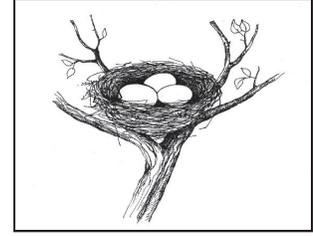
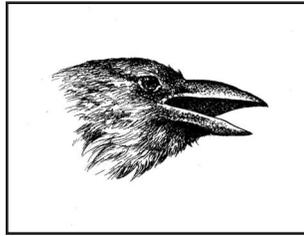
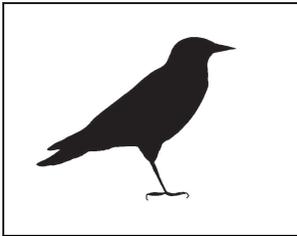
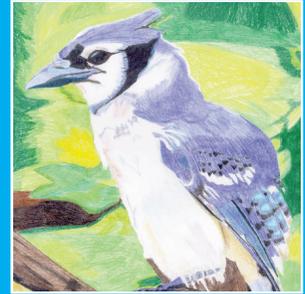


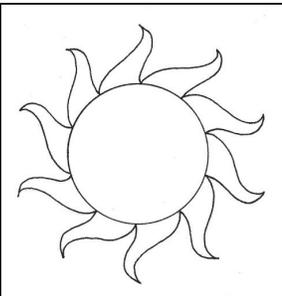


Crows, Ravens & Jays

Order Passeriformes
Family Corvidae



Members of the corvidae family are not known for their subtlety or shyness. Crows and jays are noisy, boisterous, tolerant of humans, and smart. Because of their **intelligence** they are quick to find new food sources, like a backyard feeder. When they do, they can overwhelm the area and drive other birds away. Ravens are much more wild and prefer Pennsylvania's remote wilderness areas. The birds are **physically adapted for a variety of habitats and flight patterns** - crows and ravens spend a great deal of time in the air. Their **bills and feet are well-suited to both prey on small animals or eat a wide variety of plant materials** from fruits and berries to seeds or even larger acorns.



Blue Jay *Cyanocitta cristata*



Blue Jays are considerably bigger than a robin, at almost a foot in length from the tip of their **prominent head crest** to the tip of their tail. Their **blue bodies are boldly marked with black and white**. Their large straight bill is a tool for grabbing food and hammering at it before eating. They can easily hold an acorn in their feet and chisel into it with their bill.

Preferred jay habitats are woodlands, partly wooded suburbs, farms or even city lots - as long as they can find food. **Jays are true omnivores**, though most of their diet comes from acorns, beechnuts, corn, grain, fruits and berries. They will eat carrion when they find it. All kinds of insects and small

animals make up the remainder of their diet: ants, caterpillars, beetles, grasshoppers, spiders, snails, frogs, small rodents, and even the eggs and nestlings of other birds. **Blue jays are also one of the few birds that will eat the caterpillars of both the gypsy and tent moths**, helping contain these major pests in Pennsylvania's forests.



Blue Jays are like chipmunks – when mast supplies are high, they actually **pack their throats with the extra food** and disgorge it later to eat or to cache away for a later meal. They are also **extremely vocal birds and great mimics**. Part of their name comes from their loud call of *jaay*. The call helps to sound an alarm call other jays. But they have many other calls along with a Mockingbird-like ability to imitate other birds, especially the shrieks of hawks soaring overhead. These versatile birds can also make soft, melodic sounds that are especially attractive.

In spring, jays engage in elaborate breeding behavior involving one female and many males – perhaps as many as 10 young males who follow the female. Competing calls and aggressive body movements eventually lead to the female choosing her one mate. **After building some dummy nests of twigs, both the male and female build the nest** where they will raise their brood in an evergreen shrub or tree up to 50 feet above the ground. The nests are about eight inches across and built of twigs, bark, mosses and leaves. When its complete the adults may line the nest with fine rootlets they have collected.

Three to six pale olive or buff-speckled eggs are laid in May or June. **Both the male and female quietly incubate the eggs**. But if they sense danger, they call loudly and aggressively defend the nest by diving at any intruders. Both parents also share in feeding the young, even after they are almost adult-sized and have long-since fledged from the nest.

Blue jays and other blue birds attract a lot of attention for their beautiful plumage. But **blue feathers are not a result of pigmentation in the feather, they are the result of their unique structure**. The feathers do not absorb the blue part of the light spectrum, causing it to scatter and giving an appearance of blue. **Consider the beauty of these birds an optical illusion**. And indeed, under certain lighting blue jays, bluebirds, indigo buntings and others look very gray. But in the right light they are stunning.





American Crow *Corvus brachyrhynchos*



American crows are common, but that doesn't make them any less spectacular. They are clever, curious and extremely intelligent birds who **love to collect or "steal" all kinds of strange treasures** like shiny pieces of glass or metal, rings, pens, keys, etc. Like blue jays, crows are **masters at mimicry** imitating other bird songs, whistles, cat meows and even human voices. They also have their own distinct *caws*, *coos* and soft sounds, which they use to communicate among their own species.

Crows are well-adapted to human activity but their behavior is not always appreciated. With habits of pulling up growing corn or robbing the nests of game birds, they can be considered pests, but they can also be beneficial. **Their varied diet includes harmful insects like tent caterpillars, locusts and grubs.** And they will gladly eat carrion, helping to clean up road-killed animals.

In winter, crows may **congregate in huge flocks** (called a **murder of crows**) wherever the weather is mild and food is plentiful. They roost together at night – often at roost sites established decades ago. At daybreak they fly off in smaller groups in search of food, returning to the roost each evening. Their **favorite habitat would be farm fields with scattered woodlands.** The farms provide a diverse supply of food and the woods provide roosting and nesting sites. But crows are highly adaptable and can be found in suburban areas, town, and even large cities.

Crows are large birds, up to 18 inches in length with a wingspan up to three feet. Both males and females are completely black with iridescent blue, green and purple sheens in their feathers. They have a strong bill and excellent sense of sight and hearing. **While feeding in flocks, a sentry crow will post guard** uttering a single loud *caw* for the flock to fly off if necessary. Crows are agile and skilled at evading larger predators such as hawks, eagles or owls – especially the great horned owls, with which they have an embattled relationship.

When mating season arrives, the large flocks break up and the **male crows put on spectacular flights to impress a mate.** Paired crows both help build a nest of sticks, bark and vines in woodlands up to 70' above ground in the crotch of the tree. The **big nests – perhaps two feet across –** are lined with moss, animal fur (**deer hair is a favorite**), grass, feathers, etc.

In April or May as many as six oval, bluish-green or spotted with brown and gray are laid and incubated by both male and female. The chicks hatch after about 18 days and fledge from the nest at five weeks of age. Family groups stay together for almost a year as the **young learn to survive by imitating and mimicking the adults.**





Common Raven

Corvus corax



Spotting a **Common Raven** in Pennsylvania today is an event. **At one point in our colonial history they were believed to be extant** (extinct within the state). Today they can be seen mostly in the commonwealth's northcentral region where their preferred **mountain terrain and remote forests** are found. They are big birds – **wingspans up to four feet and a body length up to 25 inches**. Jet black with some green and purple iridescence feathering, the males are larger than females. If you saw a raven by itself you might confuse it for a large crow, but if you saw them together you would have no problem distinguishing one from the other. **Ravens are nearly twice the weight of crows with a distinctly larger bill**. The **feathers ringing the raven's neck are shaggy-looking**, giving the raven a “wilder” appearance. Their tail is more wedge-shaped than the crow's and overall they are just bulkier.

Ravens are also more physically adapted for soaring than crows are. During fall migration of birds of prey the raven is more likely to be seen soaring with our diurnal predators. They call out a hard “*tock*” sound along with guttural croaking and gurgling noises.

Ravens put on amazing aerial displays during courtship. The male raven sometimes carries a large stick in courtship flights or during nest building. Their **nests are built on cliffs or at the very tops of large, mature trees**. Constructed from sticks and vines the nests are often added to each year and can be **up to four feet in diameter and one foot deep** lined with the same materials as crows use. Up to six oval dull greenish eggs with spots hatch after about three weeks. Unlike crows, ravens need more isolation in order to successfully raise their young, who are able to fledge from the nest about one month after hatching. Like crows, ravens are intelligent birds that learn by mimicry. But unlike crows they remain “wild.” But their interest in scavenging sometimes brings them into closer contact with people and civilization.

All members of the corvidae family are bold and willing to take on much larger birds if they feel their territory is being encroached upon. “**Mobbing**” hawks and crows is common as they try to de-roost and drive the other birds away. In the photo at right a raven is about to send a bald eagle on his way.

Fish Crows (*Corvus ossifragus*) are slightly smaller than American crows and never found far from the coast or large rivers. They can be identified by their *car* or *cah-cuh* call. Their scientific name literally means “bone-breaker” and they can easily take fish, crabs or whatever they can scavenge or steal from gulls and terns.

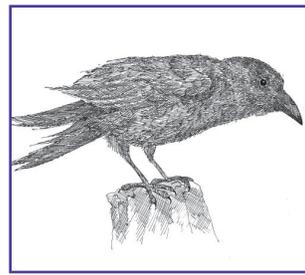




A Simple Review of Crows, Ravens & Jays



You may think that crows and ravens are blackbirds, but they belong to a different family of birds, along with the blue jay. It's true, they are black. But these **large, noisy birds all belong to the Corvidae family**. They are **intelligent, bold birds** that like to make their presence known. They **will eat just about anything** they can get a hold of and are considered **omnivores**. Fruits, seeds, insects, even small birds, reptiles, amphibians, fish and mammals may be taken.



Blue jays are common backyard birds that squawk, whistle and warbler. As loud as they sometimes are, jays can utter soft warbling songs too. And they **are great mimics** – imitating whatever birds or human sounds they hear.

Blue jays have even been observed using “tools” to help them grab food. **Like all blue birds**, their beautiful coloring is the result of feather structure, not pigmentation. **Their feathers are built in such a way as to refract light**. Depending on the light, sometimes they are a brilliant blue, sometimes gray.

Crows are bigger than jays. The large black birds are known for their loud, familiar "caw, caw, caw", call, and their **fondness for shiny objects** they often collect. Some biologists even think crows can count. Like grackles, crows will also stand on an anthill and let the insects crawl over their body – probably to help control parasites.

Would you believe a group of crows is called a “murder” of crows? Both crows and ravens have appeared in books as symbols of dark character. The poet **Edgar Allen Poe** titled one of his most famous poems, “The Raven.” It began, “Once upon a midnight dreary...” and throughout the spooky poem the raven speaks only the word, “Nevermore.”

A speaking raven is not impossible. Like jays and crows these large, raggedy-looking black birds are intelligent mimics and can learn words. They have also been known to pull on the tails of animals just to pester them. In American Indians folk stories ravens are called “tricksters.” **They are superb flyers and have even been known to fly upside down.**