

Attacks on humans and an attempted murder by crows

Birds I View

Bill Montevecchi



Parent crow feeding offspring. (Photo by Bill Montevecchi)

A couple of week ago Donna Barter was walking along Harvey Road above the Kirk, when she was stopped in her tracks by screaming aggressive crows. One bold bird swooped to the sidewalk directly in front of her threateningly spreading its wing and shrieking at her. Donna gasped, and in the next instance, a second crow unbeknownst to her dived behind her and pecked her neck. Terrifying.

Others have been threatened and attacked at this site. What caused this intimidating and potentially injury-inducing behavior by the crows?

Intrigued by the accounts and encouraged by local media, I went to investigate. Fortuitously, when I arrived a young woman was walking in precisely the location where the attacks had occurred. I watched as she walked on through. Nothing happened.

So I walked through the area a couple of times. In doing so I found a fully feathered, small young crow sound asleep on the inner curb. Someone had called the previous evening informing me of a young crow also in the area.

Having worked with birds for years and having had pet crows and ravens, I picked the little one up. He/she startled and screeched loudly. I knew if there was to be attack from above, this was the time. Nothing happened.

The lack of response from other crows was somewhat comforting but also somewhat unusual. Where were the vigilant and protective parents? Why were they not attending to the young crow which had presumably fallen out of or departed the nest too soon? When I put the young crow back on the curb, she/he begged food from me with a wide open gape.

Though nothing happened to me, it appears that the crows which were attacking passers-by in the area were behaving as good protective parents. Wild birds and many animals are often most aggressive to “intruders” when their inexperienced young are gaining independence.

The plot thickens

Next I received an email from someone who had been raising a young crow and had recently released it nearby on Long’s Hill area. I asked the emailer to go and see if she recognized the young crow. However, the crows were not at the Harvey Road site when she visited. They seem to be there intermittently and more often in the evening.

Unlike the large crows, the young one has white in its wings and spends a lot of time in nearby backyards and on the sidewalk near people, though it can fly well. Based on events to date, my interpretation of the situation is that the crows by the Kirk “adopted” the abandoned young crow that had been hand-raised.

This scenario helps explain a number of things. First, why the protector crows were not present when I picked up the shrieking youngster - presumably they were not as tightly tied to the site as vigilant original parents with a nest in the area might have been. Second, the food-begging response that the young crow made to me and its proximity to people suggested strongly that bird was familiar with human contact.

Wildlife experiences have shown how extremely difficult it is to release a hand-reared animal back into the wild. So it seems what many people have unwantingly experienced was the protective reaction of overzealous foster parents protecting a young hand-reared crow attracted to people. This situation is likely to continue for a time. Though there is need for awareness and caution, there is no need for crisis management.

Attempted murder by crows

Meanwhile, I received a report of a more lethal attack by crows, but this one directed at other crows rather than humans. Lisa Piercey and her husband heard a raucous cacophony by their house on Empire Avenue.

When her husband looked out, he saw a crow with spread wings holding another down, while a third crow forcefully pecked its head, obviously trying to kill. When Lisa and her husband walked out on their deck, the crows dispersed, and the one being assaulted also flew off.

Crow murders may not be all that uncommon. Last summer I stared dumbfounded at an ongoing assault like that described above. After a few minutes and realizing what the eventual outcome would be, I dispersed the lot.

Crows often get good press for their intellectual prowess, and bad press for their aggressive behavior. Yet one way or another, they continuously attract our attention. Caw, caw.

Tributes to the great auk and lessons in extinction

On Fogo Island, tribute to the extinct great auk is ongoing. Todd McGrain's stunningly impressive sculpture on the rocks of Joe Batt's Point is now weathered to an brilliant oxidized green. The auk looks hauntingly out toward Funk Island. The great auk lives on in the sculpture's luring attraction of locals and visitors alike.

In early August, McGrain's film, "The Lost Bird Project" will be shown at the Shorefast Theatre on Fogo Island. As my daughter Gioia endorsed when she, my wife Janet and I enjoyed the film in the recent Nickel film series at the LSPU Hall – "it's genuine".

Harry Sheppard has carved a life-sized great auk which sits atop a rock in Stag Harbour. The community is the first that one arrives at when leaving the ferry on Fogo Island. Expressions of the extinct "Penguin of the North Atlantic" are now at each end of the island. In between at Seldom-Come-By, the Funk Island - Great Auk Exhibit on the wharf at the Fisheries Interpretation center also profiles the vanished species.

Roy Ficken's impressive Great Auk Totem that he created for the millennium Birds 2000 Conference at Memorial University is in my possession. I am working to find a fitting home for Roy's artistic expression – perhaps it will reside in Musgrave Harbour looking out toward the aptly named Penquin Islands.

Dr. Andrus Voik, the province's mushroom expert, has a set of mind-stopping statues by David Pelletier that includes both the auk and a naked human reaching out to

the bird. Dr. Voik's gripping description of the haunting power of these creations appears in the Spring 2012 issue of *The Osprey* (<http://naturenl.ca/osprey>).

Each of these expressions and many that will follow reaffirms the auk's existence and keeps it present. Like us the Beothuk People also revered and exploited the great auk. Like the auks they too are here in spirit, relict and tribute.

Birds in our area and around the province

In the wake of the *DeepWater Horizon* oil disaster in the Gulf of Mexico, the gannet population in the species' largest North American colony on Bonaventure Island in the Gulf of St. Lawrence has decreased by about 10%. Gannets in Newfoundland may be faring better. For the third year, prospecting gannets are roosting on Green Island in Witless Bay where the increasing eagle population is keeping tens of thousands of murrelets off their nests. At Cape St. Mary's, Tony Power is finding huge increases of nesting gannets.

Herring gull-sized Caspian terns have been in the river behind the Esso station in Stoneville on the way to Fogo Island during June and July. These terns with their large blood red beaks add grandeur to the river-roosting gulls and are likely nesting nearby.

On Waterford Bridge Road, Kelly Fleming and husband have been feeding a crow with a broken wing that has been living in a tree in their backyard for a number of years.

An exciting early morning call on 8 July from Luise Hermanutz highlighted a hummingbird feeding at columbines in her garden on Bauline Line. A few days later, Dr. John Lewis followed up with a sighting of a hummingbird in his garden in Holyrood. Both John and Luise considered that they had seen a female Ruby-throated hummingbird. These tiny nectar-feeders nest in the Codroy Valley and are the expected hummingbird species, though the persistent strong westerly winds of early July imply that other potential vagrants cannot be ruled out. Luise was also enthusiastic about her recent walk in Marlene Creates' poetry garden.

Pam Williams has captured some interesting photos of juncos walking the long stalks of wispy white dandelions and feeding on the seeds. Want birds in your yard – let the dandelions be.

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