

# BOGDIVERSITY THURSDAY



—*from Head Naturalist Clinton*

## Common Raven

POST #16—January 27, 2022

In the depths of winter, birding can be hard. Temperatures of -20 and -30 F can make it difficult to find any birds at all. One of the few birds you might see at extremely cold temperatures is our featured species today: Common Raven!

Common Ravens are amazing birds. They are the largest passerine bird in North America, they have incredible intelligence, elaborate courtship behaviors, and are an incredibly widespread and successful species. Common Ravens are found throughout the boreal forests of the world, from mountains to deserts, and in urban and wilderness spaces.

Common Ravens are wary and sometimes don't allow for great looks, and often can get confused with American Crows where they overlap in range. American Crows are significantly smaller than Common Ravens, sound different (sharp cawing vs hoarse croaking), and even fly differently! American Crows typically flap consistently when flying, where Common Ravens fly like raptors, with strong wingbeats and gliding.

Winter is a great time of year to watch Common Ravens. Not only is January and February when courtship and nesting begins for this species, but winter also gives you a chance to watch some interesting behaviors due to increased snow cover. For example, Common Ravens will cooperatively hunt voles and other mammals during the winter! Voles and mice are prey for owls, raptors, and shrikes, but Common Ravens will also catch them. I (Head Naturalist Clinton) have watched them chase voles out of the snow and onto the roads to make them easier to catch. Their large bills make them a powerful predator when necessary.

Courtship behaviors are a pleasure to watch and I would encourage folks visiting the Bog at this time of the year to take some time to seek out and observe these behaviors. One of the easiest behaviors to see are courtship flights. Often, you will see pairs of ravens flying in coordinated flights together, sometimes carrying nesting material. However, if you get lucky enough to find a deer carcass, many courtship behaviors (like strutting, dominance posturing, and pair bonding) happen near or on carcasses!

There is a lot to love about Common Ravens, much more than can be shared in one post. More information is included in the photos below!

(Photos by Sparky Stensaas)



With strong wing beats and intermittent soaring on broad wings, Common Ravens are sometimes confused for raptors! Note the wedge-shaped tail and prominent bill and head.



Winter can be a great time to observe Common Ravens. Whether you find a group near a road kill, a single bird patrolling the boreal forest, or a pair of birds courting, Common Ravens are one of the few birds we see out and about at the coldest temperatures of the season.



Common Ravens have incredibly mobile feathers around their heads. They use these feathers to display, especially when courting. By flaring throat hackles, fuzzing head feathers, or displaying plumicorns, Common Ravens can be incredibly expressive.



Common Raven courtship is beginning right now! Males and females have specific behaviors and sounds they make during their elaborate courtship and nest building. This raven is doing a bowing and knocking display, flashing its nictitating membrane, bowing, and spreading its wings.



After successful courtship, it is time to raise chicks! Common Ravens build large, stick nests which can be perched on cliffs, under bridges, or even in trees. Young corvids are wonderful! They have bright blue eyes when they fledge and are incredibly loud!