

Bird Notes by Rick Pyeritz

Audubon's 'Un'Common Raven

Although John James Audubon never saw the Raven in our mountains, he observed the bird frequently in other parts of its range.

“In the United States, the Raven is in some measure a migratory bird, individuals retiring to the extreme south during severe winters, but returning to the Northern, Middle and Western districts at the first indications of milder weather. . . . Their usual places of resort are the mountains, the abrupt banks of rivers, the rocky shores of lakes, and the cliffs of thinly- peopled or deserted islands. It is in such places that these birds must be watched and examined, before one can judge of their natural habitats, as manifested amid their freedom from the dread of their most dangerous enemy, the lord of the creation.”

Audubon continues with his description of the Raven's breeding behavior.

“There through the clear and rarified atmosphere, the Raven spreads his glossy wings and tail, and, as if conscious that the nearer he approaches the sun, the more splendent will become the tints of his plumage. Intent on convincing his mate of the fervor and constancy of his love, he now gently glides beneath her, floats in the buoyant air, or sails by her side. Would that I could describe to you, reader, the many musical inflections by means of which they hold converse during these amatory excursions! These sounds doubtless express their pure conjugal feelings, confirmed and rendered more intense by long years of happiness in each other's society.”

The care, feeding and protection of the young are described in the next paragraphs.

“...At length the young burst the shell, when the careful parents, after congratulating each other on the happy event, disgorge some half-macerated food, which they deposit in their tender mouths. Should the most daring adventurer of the air approach, he is attacked with fury and repelled. As the young grow up they are urged to be careful and silent:--a single false movement might precipitate them into the abyss below; a single cry during the absence of their parents might bring upon them the remorseless claws of the swift Peregrine or Jerfalcon.”



He continues with his description of the conflicted relationship between the Raven and humans.

“Notwithstanding all the care of the Raven, his nest is invaded wherever it is found. His usefulness is forgotten, his faults are remembered and multiplied by imagination, and whenever he presents himself he is shot at, because from time immemorial ignorance, prejudice and destructiveness have operated on the mind of man to his detriment. Men will peril their lives to reach his nest, assisted by ropes and poles, alleging merely that he has killed one of their numerous sheep or lambs. Some say they destroy the Raven because he is black; others because his croaking is unpleasant and ominous! Unfortunate truly are the young ones that are carried home to become the wretched pets of some ill-brought-up child!It is true that he may sometimes hasten the death of a half-stayed steep, or destroy a weakly lamb, he may eat the eggs of other birds, or occasionally steal from the farmer some of those which he calls his own; young fowls also afford precious morsels to himself and his progeny;---but how many sheep lambs, and fowls are saved through his agency! The more intelligent of our farmers are well aware that the Raven destroys numberless insects, grubs and worms; that he kills mice moles and rats, whenever he can find them; that he will seize the weasel, the young opossum, and the skunk; that, with the perseverance of a cat, he will watch the burrows of foxes, and pounce on the cubs; our farmers also are fully aware that he apprises them of the wolf's prowling around their yard, and that he never intrudes on their corn-fields except to benefit them;--yes good reader, the farmer knows all this well....”

“For my part, I admire the Raven, because I see much in him calculated to excite our wonder.”

I feel our chapter's newsletter, The Raven's Nest, is well named after such an interesting avian resident of our mountains as the Raven.

Comments/Questions email me capyeritz@gmail.com.