



Urban Wildlife Issues  
Wildlife Rescue column by Nicky Fried  
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## Good news about 'bad' crows

Love 'em or hate 'em, you certainly can't ignore them. They are either noisy and pesky or intelligent and resourceful, depending on how you view them. I am, of course, speaking about crows.

Right now, quite a few people have a rather negative perspective of crows in the Lower Mainland.

The Wildlife Rescue Association of B.C. is currently receiving around 50 calls a day from frightened or angry members of the public concerned about crows' dive bombing behaviour.

I too have been a victim of the black bomber. I was innocently walking down a quiet, tree-lined street and suddenly a hellion is diving straight for me out of nowhere. I make a hasty retreat and the bird does some strutting of the "Hey, I'm the boss around here" nature. We all know who the winner is.

It's hardly surprising that crows are not the most popular of our local birds: they are feathered in boring black, are terribly noisy and have a tendency to go after carrion. Let's face it, there are more charismatic creatures.

And the press hasn't been that good over the years. Consider this line from the epic poem *Beowulf*, written in the eighth century: "But the raven, eager for the doomed ones, as he shall say much to the eagle of what success he had at feeding, when he, with the wolf, plundered the corpses." Later Shakespeare says, in *Macbeth*, the raven "croaks the evil entrance."

And consider how we use the word "crow" in modern English. We talk about someone "crowing" over another's misfortune - hardly a positive image. It's about time crows got some good press. First, the bombing. It's actually perfectly natural behaviour for crows. They are great parents and are only protecting their young.

One has to admire their spunk. It's disconcerting to be on the receiving end of a crow attack, but it's all about keeping the babies safe.

If you stay clear of nesting crows you will be a great deal safer. Of course, it's hard to tell if you are walking beneath a nesting crow as they build their nests at least 20 metres

above the ground and they prefer coniferous trees. We do have quite a few conifers in this part of the world! Crows continue to protect their youngsters until they can fly.

Young crows spend up to 10 days on the ground learning to fly. So if you see a young crow on the ground - unless it is in danger - leave it alone. It's safer for you and the young crow.

The Lower Mainland is home to the Northwestern crow, a smaller version of the American crow found elsewhere in Canada. Crows are opportunistic feeders and near the coast eat more seafood than they do further inland.

You will often see them on the beach looking for tasty morsels. Crows also enjoy human garbage. Because crows also feed on other birds, they are frequently mobbed by smaller birds. A whole flock of small birds will dive bomb a crow and drive it off. This is common behaviour at this time of year when birds are rearing their young.

Birds as a whole don't have an elaborate cerebral cortex: much of their intelligence is found in a region of the forebrain called the hyperstriatum. Birds in the corvid family (which includes crows, ravens and magpies) have the largest hyperstriatums and the largest overall brain size of all birds.

These intelligent birds are capable of solving simple problems and can often be seen dropping shellfish from the air onto rocks to get at the flesh inside. They can also count. An experiment by German ethnologist, Otto Koehler, showed that ravens could match the number of objects to dots on a lid for a food reward.

Crows have a fairly sophisticated language. They are very successful mimics and they can learn to associate noises with events, especially food. Between one another, they use a wide variety of low calls, often sounding like they are talking.

During the mating season, monogamous pairs will defend their territory. The rest of the year, they flock in small groups during the day. At night they will roost in huge groups of up to several thousand.

If you are not too keen on sharing your garden with a crow, then lock up the garbage and feed the cat indoors.