

American Crow *Corvus brachyrhynchos*



Folk Name: Crow, Jim Crow

Status: Resident

Abundance: Very Common to Abundant

Habitat: Pines and mixed forest when breeding/
roosting—open habitat when foraging

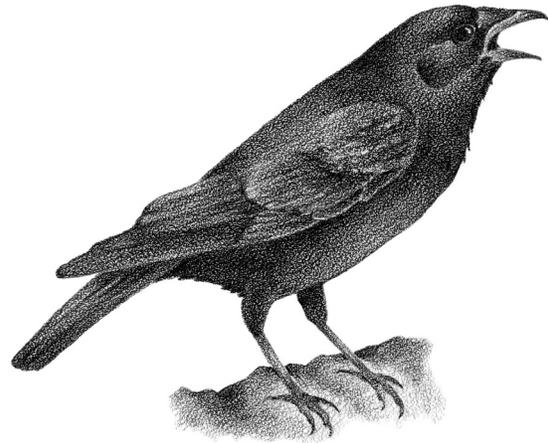
North Carolina and South Carolina ornithologists independently christened the American Crow as “the best-known bird” in both states. This 18-inch iridescent black Corvid is common throughout the Carolinas, and it is regularly heard and seen by almost everyone, whether they live in rural areas, towns, or urban areas. The rough *caw, caw, caw* call of the crow is taught to children in grade school and hearing it is an ordinary part of daily life for most people growing up in the South.

Though well known by all, these birds have not been well respected by all. In fact, the American Crow has been one of the most reviled and mistreated birds in Carolina history. Rod Amundson, an award-winning editor of *Wildlife in North Carolina* magazine, shared his thoughts on the iconic crow, writing in part:

A thief, scoundrel pirate, marauder, scavenger, raucous-voiced despoiler of duck nests—these are but a few of the printable adjectives ascribed to the crow. He is a clown, a mimic, a tormentor, and a tender, loving parent. In addition to this and more, he is one of the smartest birds, ranking high in intelligence and physical development. One of the most universally hated and persecuted of birds, the crow has followed mankind throughout the limits of agriculture, and has held his own in number despite massed gunfire, bombing, and poison. One cannot help admiring such a bird even though it



American Crow. (jeff Lemons)



steals corn, chickens, robs bird’s nests, then sits at a safe distance in a tree top and literally laughs at the whole affair.

Life in the nineteenth and much of the twentieth century was, at times, particularly hard for crows in the Carolinas. In winter, migrant crows descended en masse from the North to spend the winter in the South. These crows foraged over the open countryside during the day, and at night they joined together to form massive communal roosting flocks. These enormous flocks frequently became the target of the ire of local farmers, resulting in constant harassment, mass shootings, and even dynamite bombings. Many anecdotal accounts regarding these roosts were published.

“About two miles from Mt. Mourne in Davidson township, there is a crow roost...thousands of crows collect every night...They are imported stock, however, for the usual quota of crows are scattered about the country and refuse to associate with the newcomers. ...

The people in the vicinity of the roost, fearful about their staying around until corn planting time, are taking measures to destroy as many of them as possible. Every clear moonlit night the carnage goes on. Old men and young men, big boys and little boys, with all manner of shooting irons, go to the roost. As the pine trees are just bending with crows, there is nothing to do but point the gun upwards and pull the trigger; down come the birds. ...Even the oldest inhabitant cannot give a parallel to this crow phenomenon. One thing is sure, unless this vast horde of birds is killed or die or leave, in the next two months, it will be next to impossible to get a stand

of corn in this section of country this year.”
—*Statesville Record and Landmark*, March 6, 1885

“There is an immense crow roost in a patch of thick pine woods, about three miles southeast of the city, and every afternoon, a little before sunset, the crows can be seen flying over the city in the direction of the roost, in great numbers. For the past five days, the crow column has been observed flying over the city, and, yesterday, the flight was one of such magnitude that it attracted general attention. The flight lasted for two hours and the column of crows stretched from horizon to horizon.”

—*The Charlotte Observer*, January 13, 1887

“Wholesale Slaughter of Crows... Tuesday night the citizens of the northern section of our town [Mooresville] and the vicinity immediately adjacent beyond the town’s limits, were aroused about 11 o’clock by a regular bombardment, a la Tripoli, sounding as if a whole battery had been turned loose on the town. Of course, a great many people wondered at the terrific fusillade at that time of night, but many again retired to their beds expecting to hear of a raid by burglars, moonshiners, or something else. However, it was learned yesterday morning that a number of young men had taken their guns and gone to a point beyond the slaughter pen, where a ‘crow roost’ had been located. It is said the youngsters killed nearly two hundred during the raid.”

—*The Evening Chronicle* (Charlotte), December 9, 1911

One massive crow roost in the town of Sharon, near what today is called South Park in Charlotte, drew statewide attention during the winter of 1919. People came from all around to view it. Even the ornithologists at the North Carolina State Museum remarked on its immense size, though the total number of birds at the roost (said to be many thousands) was unknown.

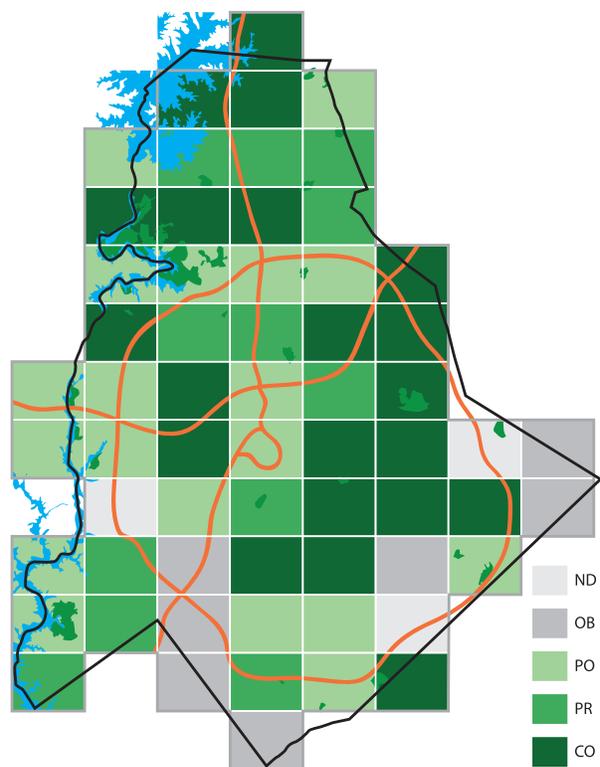
The size of these winter roosting flocks declined over the past century, while breeding populations in the South have steadily grown. Some ornithologists believe this is due primarily to the abandonment of farmland and changes in farming practices in the northeastern and central United States. Also, food is readily available in growing urban regions and crows have adapted to living in these areas year-round. Massive winter crow roosts have become a fable of this region’s past. Today, a single winter flock of 50 crows would seem large. In recent years, our highest total one-day count is just over 700 birds, tallied on an Iredell County CBC in 2000.

In the 1950s and 1960s, crow hunting became more of an individual sport and less of an all-out community battle. It became common practice for crow hunters to use battery-powered phonographs to play records of various crow calls to attract the birds to a field. One hunter, a physician by trade, reported:

If there are crows around you’re going to get some shots... Neal Smith and I killed 152 down near the N.C.–S.C. border one day. My wife says I kill so many that I should get a bounty from the state, but I feel that the sport they provide is bounty aplenty. I like to feel that I’m aiding the farmer, too. There’s no limit, no season and plenty of crows. And it provides a test of skill in shooting.

Another common practice at this time was to take crows killed during recent hunts and impale them on barb wire fences surrounding crop fields. This was done in an attempt to warn other crows to stay far away from the area. This custom is believed to have had little efficacy. One photograph published in the *Statesville Record and Landmark* on January 12, 1959, showed about 200 crow carcasses hung on a fence around a farmer’s field on Wayside Road in Iredell County.

In 1972, the American Crow finally received basic protection as a migratory bird under the federal Migratory Bird Treaty Act; however, it is still labelled as a game bird and it can be legally hunted during established seasons in both Carolinas. Also, crows can still be legally shot if they are causing damage to agricultural crops. One local deer hunter noted: “Some of us like to keep our ‘shooting eye’ sharp, and enjoy crow hunting in the off-season.”



Mecklenburg County Breeding Bird Atlas:
Widespread (PR/12, CO/21)

American Crows nest throughout the Carolina Piedmont, primarily in pine stands or mixed woods, and often in one of the tallest trees in the stand. They begin nesting as early as February. Like the Blue Jay, they are quiet and secretive around their nests and the nests are hard to locate.

Crows forage for food in open areas away from their nest sites. They are omnivorous and they are opportunistic feeders that will eat pretty much anything they can find that is edible. They almost always feed while walking or hopping on the ground. On May 16, 1948, ornithologist Alexander Sprunt was very surprised to observe a crow gather food from the surface of Lake Tillery while the bird was in flight. His friend Harry T. Davis later

published this note because of the unusual nature of this observation: "As we were watching one Crow which was about 150 yards downstream, approximately in the center of the lake, the bird paused in flight and dipped to pick up in its beak an object from the surface of the water. As the Crow flew to the opposite side of the lake, our binoculars disclosed the object might have been a dead frog or fish."

Mecklenburg County BBS volunteers confirmed the American Crow as a widespread breeding bird in the county. Crows were observed nesting in the tops of tall pine trees. Several nesting pairs in one heavily wooded residential neighborhood were repeatedly observed sallying forth from their nests to ward off small groups of Fish Crows that had flown into the area.