

Common Raven *Corvus corax*



Folk Name: Northern Raven

Status: Resident

Abundance: Rare to Uncommon

Habitat: Breeds on ledges in local rock quarries—forages in open areas

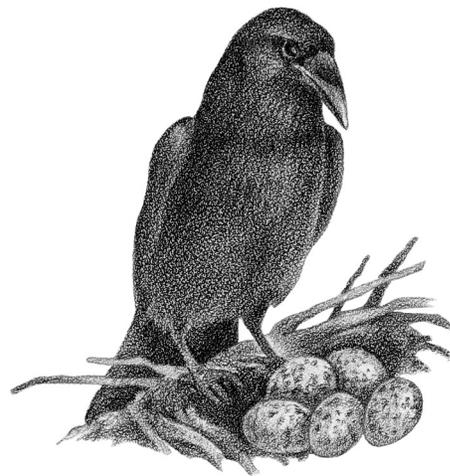
The Common Raven is our largest member of the family Corvidae. Averaging about 25 inches in length, this all-black bird is quite an impressive sight. It can be distinguished from our two crow species by its large size, its long heavy bill, and its deeper, hoarse-sounding voice. It also has a noticeably wedge-shaped tail. Tom Sanders recommends a behavioral trait to watch for. When landing, an American Crow will “invariably readjust its flight feathers by flicking out its wings and refolding them whereas the Raven will land and go about its business without this readjustment.” In the Carolinas, this bird is usually found nesting on steep cliff faces.

The historic status of this Corvid in the Piedmont of the Carolinas is unclear. In the 1800s, the Common Raven was known to breed along the Blue Ridge escarpment in South Carolina and in the mountains of North Carolina. In North Carolina, ravens were recorded as far east as the coast. There were several anecdotal accounts of ravens in the Piedmont of South Carolina published in the nineteenth century.

In an 1889 issue of the journal *The Auk*, ornithologist Leverett Loomis published a secondhand account of the Common Raven in the Central Carolina region. He reported that “between fifty and sixty years ago, the Raven was ‘plentiful’ in the portions of Chester and York counties contiguous to the Broad River,” but entirely absent from the same area after the Civil War. Persecution of this species was common in the South during the nineteenth century. In 1890, Loomis noted “Whenever the chance offers, their nests are broken up and the young destroyed.” Although there is no firsthand published record, it is plausible that Common Ravens nested during that period on the craggy cliffs of Kings Mountain and Crowders Mountain in Cleveland and Gaston counties, and perhaps in the South Mountains and Brushy Mountains as well.

Certainly, by the early twentieth century the Common Raven was not present in the Carolina Piedmont and nesting ravens appeared to be restricted to higher elevation sites in the North Carolina mountains. Elmer Brown of Davidson College confirmed ravens nesting on a cliff at Grandfather Mountain on April 7, 1940. He counted four young in a nest cavity in the side of a cliff. The young fledged on 5 May.

In March 1974, ravens were confirmed nesting on a cliff at Pilot Mountain State Park in Surry County, providing



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the easternmost nesting record for North Carolina. On May 29, 1983, David Wright spotted one in South Mountains State Park, and a ranger reported the birds had been nesting near there for several years; however, this nest remained unverified. Doug McNair confirmed nesting at Table Rock State Park in South Carolina in March 1986. Ravens were later discovered nesting nearby at Caesars Head State Park at the appropriately named “Raven Cliff Falls.” Irvin Pitts sighted one in Spartanburg, SC, on December 30, 1989, providing a rare record for the South Carolina Piedmont. In March 1991, a nest was confirmed at a rock quarry near Reidsville in Rockingham

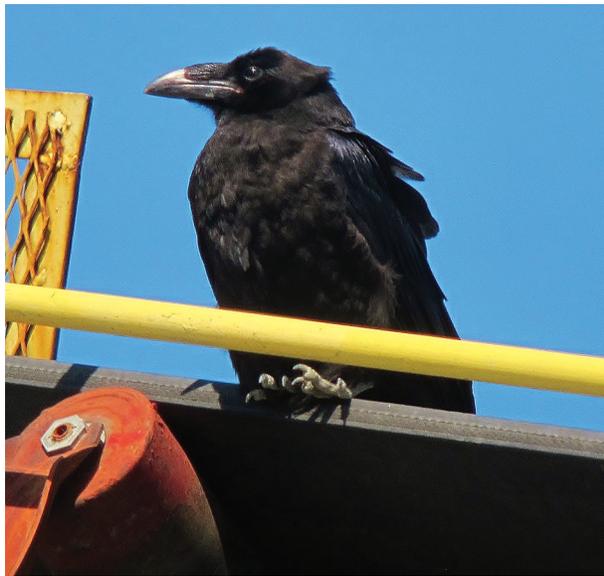


Common Raven nest, Mecklenburg County. (Jeff Lemons)

County, and a nest was confirmed at a rock quarry in Forsyth County. These were the first confirmed nesting records for the North Carolina Piedmont.

Piedmont sightings increased in North Carolina in the 1990s. In the early 2000s, multiple “Briefs for the Files” reports were published in *The Chat* further documenting an eastward expansion of this species. In 2002, Common Ravens were reported in the Central Carolina region. Two ravens were seen on January 2, 2002, in Lexington in Davidson County, and on February 20, 2002, Eric Harrold reported seeing a Common Raven in Mecklenburg County. Ravens have been reported in this region almost annually since.

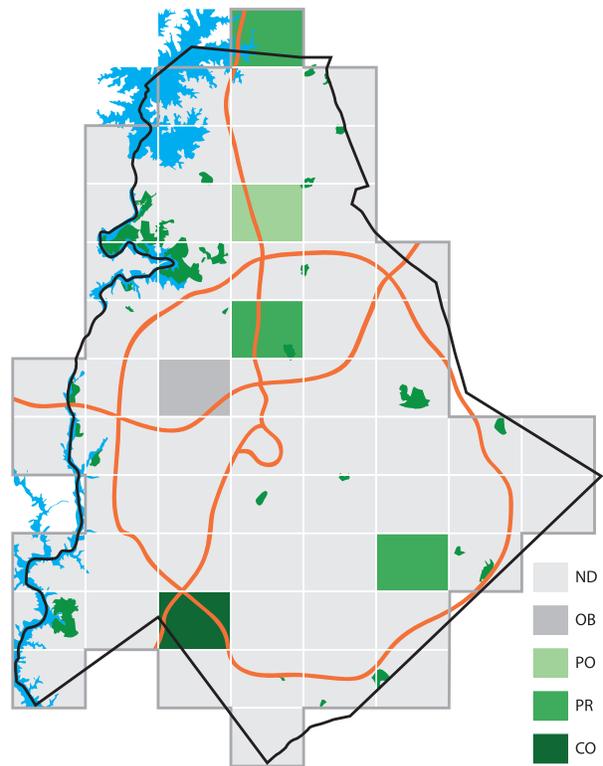
Jeff Lemons obtained the first photographic documentation for the region on December 21, 2008. He was participating in the Southern Lake Norman Christmas Bird Count when a raven flew overhead. David and Marcia Wright confirmed the first Common Raven nest in the Central Carolinas at the Vulcan Quarry on Nations Ford Road in Charlotte on March 31, 2010. Nestlings were photographed there by Jeff Lemons on April 1, 2010. Our highest single count is a flock of nine seen at one time by Dwayne Martin on October 30, 2014, at Rocky Face Mountain in Alexander County. Groups of five have been reported on three different occasions in the region.



Common Raven. (John Scavetto)

The Common Raven has been placed on the North Carolina “Watch List” because it is rare to uncommon as a breeding bird in the state. However, in recent years, its breeding range has been expanding eastward. In addition to the Mecklenburg County nesting sites mapped below, breeding is currently suspected at rock quarries: near Gold Hill in western Cabarrus County (along the Rowan–Cabarrus county line); near Kings Mountain in Cleveland County; and off Rocky River Road in Union County.

Mecklenburg County Breeding Bird Atlas volunteers documented Common Raven in a total of four survey blocks in Mecklenburg County, but nesting was confirmed in only one block. Access was denied to several commercial rock quarry sites where breeding is now suspected. Three survey blocks were designated as probable breeding sites and one as possible breeding. Each of these breeding sites appeared to be correlated with the presence of an open pit rock quarry in the county.



Mecklenburg County Breeding Bird Atlas:

Local (PR/3, CO/1)