

Fish Crow *Corvus ossifragus*



Folk Name: Jackdaw

Status: Breeder, Migrant, increasing Winter Resident

Abundance: Common

Habitat: Lakes, ponds, landfills, shopping centers, residential neighborhoods

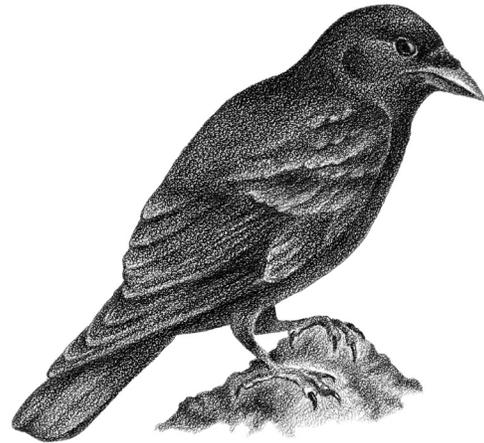
The Fish Crow appears almost identical to the American Crow, but at 15 inches, it averages 2–3 inches smaller. Its all-black plumage appears more smooth and glossy, its head appears smaller, its wings are a bit more pointed, and its tail is a bit longer. The call of these birds differs substantially, and it is often the best or only way to separate the two. The Fish Crow's call sounds like a nasal *uhn uhn* or *nyuh uh*—like its repeatedly saying “no.” In Florida, birders jokingly refer to it as “the virgin bird.”

Fish Crows are omnivores. At inland locations, they are known to scavenge for food at landfills and shopping centers, and they often raid the nests of birds and of turtles to eat their eggs. They are known to use mobbing techniques to raid heron and tern rookeries to get both eggs and young birds. They are also known to target the eggs of Common Grackles, Common Nighthawks, Blue Jays, and Mallards, among others.

Parker Whedon, a Charlotte fisherman, shared this account of a Fish Crow scavenging food on Lake Moultrie, South Carolina, with the editors of *Wildlife in North Carolina* magazine:

I noticed an osprey with a large shad in his talons, curiously hovering about 50 feet above the treetops of the island. After I watched for a minute and pondered the osprey's strange behavior in not seeking a suitable dead tree for eating his lunch, a large eagle rose from below the treetops and bore in on the osprey. Following but lagging considerably behind the eagle, was a fish crow. The osprey spiraled upward to evade the onrushing eagle but, after attaining an altitude of about 500 feet, released the shad in defeat. As the shad plummeted earthward the eagle folded his wings and like a thunderbolt he fell, making his pass at the shad about 20 feet above the water. He missed and soared upwards, whereupon the crow sailed in to the spot where the shad had fallen. The osprey and the eagle—both cheated—flew off into the distance. Please advise me the I.Q. rating which your biologists would assign the crow in the above story.

The Fish Crow is a relative newcomer to the Central Carolinas. It was originally restricted to tidewater areas and “a strip of undetermined width” along the Carolina



coast. In the late 1960s and 1970s, the Fish Crow expanded its breeding range inland to Raleigh, and by the late 1980s and early 1990s, it expanded into much of the rest of the Carolina Piedmont. By 1987, they were nesting as far west as Clemson, South Carolina, and (apparently) Guilford County in North Carolina. The Clemson nests were built in pine trees beginning in the second week of April. Fish Crows are known to nest about 1–2 months later than American Crows nesting in the same area.

The Fish Crow was first reported in this region on the Stanly Spring Bird Count on May 9, 1964. The first was reported in Mecklenburg County on May 10, 1968. A flock of 25 Fish Crows was heard and seen on the Iredell Spring Bird Count held on May 8, 1982. The compiler wondered: “Is this the first record of this species in this area?” One Fish Crow was highlighted as “still not seen on many of our counts” on the Charlotte count held on

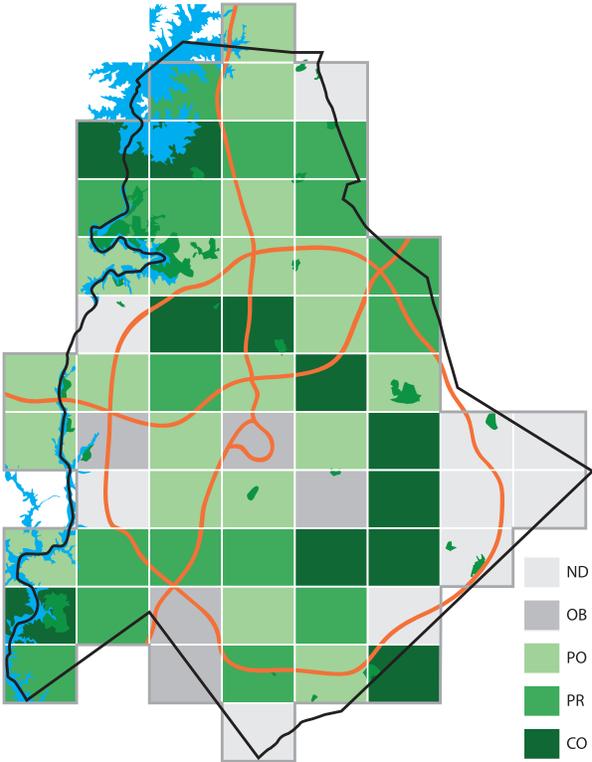


Fish Crow in flight. (Jeff Lemons)

May 4, 1985. Bill Hilton Jr. reported several spent the winter of 1986–1987 near Rock Hill.

The number of Fish Crows found here has slowly increased since the late 1980s and 1990s. They generally arrive in the Central Carolina region after Valentine’s Day and depart the region by Halloween. Since the turn of the twenty-first century, individuals have been regularly reported lingering during the winter months, but no large communal winter roosts have been reported in the region. Currently, Fish Crows are arriving in numbers earlier with some being reported as early as the second week in January. Our highest one-day count is about 140 birds. It is interesting to note that the Fish Crow expanded into the region about the time Great Blue Heron breeding colonies expanded here, and about the same time, Common Nighthawks began to rapidly disappear.

Mecklenburg County Breeding Bird Atlas volunteers reported probable nests in tall pines in several residential areas. There were also several reports of possible nesting on top of large strip malls and department stores. Taylor Piephoff confirmed a Fish Crow nest in Mecklenburg County on March 27, 2011. He watched a bird carrying twigs to the top of a pine tree in Mint Hill. The tree was at the edge of a shopping center near a residential neighborhood. In Mecklenburg County, the Fish Crow does not appear to be closely associated with water while nesting.



Mecklenburg County Breeding Bird Atlas:
Fairly Widespread (PR/16, CO/11)