

CHANGING STATUS OF THE FISH CROW INLAND

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Bird students are hereby asked to be alert to the status of the Fish Crow (*Corvus ossifragus*) in the Carolinas. The big black bird flapping past no longer can be dismissed as a Common Crow (*Corvus brachyrhynchos*); it may well be a Fish Crow, which certainly is extending its range. Telling the two apart is a nice exercise in identification. Finally, we need to know a lot more about the food habits of the Fish Crow.

Consider how easy it used to be to list Fish Crow on your field card. *Birds of North Carolina* (Pearson et al., 1942) says flatly that the range in North Carolina is confined to a strip of undetermined width *along the coast*. In *A Field Guide to the Birds* (Peterson, 1947), the Master said, "Listen for this small crow along tidewater ... it is seldom far from tidewater." It is the same story in Georgia (Burleigh, 1958), where the Fish Crow is termed a common resident on the coast and of local occurrence in the interior of the state near the larger streams and bodies of water. "The Fish Crow is so called because of its preference for the vicinity of water, where as a scavenger, it undoubtedly includes dead fish as a part of its diet."

Frank Chapman (Chapman, 1940) said, "The Fish Crow, while not confined to the coast or even the vicinity of water, is not found far inland." A later sage (Wetmore, 1964) finds the Fish Crow "from the inland edge of tidewater country to the sea along the Atlantic and Gulf coasts."

Reading books published in the last 30 or 40 years, you get the feeling that observers were sensing a change in the affinity of Fish Crows for salt water. Gilbert Grosvenor (1937) said, "You may find them inland, especially in the southern states." Gilbert Pearson (1936): "Far more common along the coast and about rivers and lakes than in the fields and wooded uplands. Not restricted to the immediate coast but extending back to the base of the Blue Ridge mountains, at least in summer."

Other voices were heard. Richard Pough (1949): "A bird of low coastal country, but it also frequents rivers, swamps and lakes for some distance inland." Verne Davison (1967): "A common year-long resident along stream and bay shores of the Gulf and Atlantic coasts and *large southern rivers*."

Back in 1937, Dr. Murphey (1937) said the Fish Crow was uncommon around Augusta, Georgia, and sharply limited to the river bottoms of the Savannah and its *larger tributaries*.

At the northern end of its range, the Fish Crow was found to be an uncommon summer resident in New York City, frequenting woodlands *near water* (Arbib et al., 1966).

For a long time, it seemed to be conceded that this was a salt-water bird which might move inland if large bodies of water were available. But Harold Peters (1957) said that the bird was a common, breeding permanent resident in Georgia, to be found in open woods or parks, cultivated fields of cropland, roadsides on fence posts and telephone wires.

The Fish Crow is not known in Atlanta where I lived for 20 years. So when I moved to Rocky Mount, N.C., in 1973, I assumed that all the crows I saw in town, over shopping centers and on the farms, were Common Crows—until I heard them call. At first, I supposed that a few of the birds were Fish Crows; the two species are said to feed together (Robbins et al., 1966). A year has gone by and I have yet to hear a Common Crow in Rocky Mount; they all appear to be Fish Crows. We do have the Tar River here, but it is hardly the large river which seemed a requisite; our large body of water is the new Tar River Reservoir, and I find no evidence at all that Fish Crows feed near the reservoir.

Let's look farther inland—to Raleigh. Hader (1969) says wisely "that the residence status of the Fish Crow needs clarification. It was first recorded 24 March 1962, and

TABLE 1. *Spring Bird Count totals for Fish Crow and Common Grackle at Raleigh, N.C., 1956 through 1974.*

| Year | Common Grackle | Fish Crow |
|------|----------------|-----------|
| 1956 | 0 | 0 |
| 1957 | 1 | 0 |
| 1958 | No report | No report |
| 1959 | 2 | 0 |
| 1960 | 15 | 0 |
| 1961 | 6 | 0 |
| 1962 | 10 | 0 |
| 1963 | 10 | 0 |
| 1964 | 38 | 1 |
| 1965 | 60 | 19 |
| 1966 | 67 | 5 |
| 1967 | 807 | 12 |
| 1968 | 275 | 5 |
| 1969 | 535 | 5 |
| 1970 | 308 | 24 |
| 1971 | 166 | 13 |
| 1972 | 618 | 9 |
| 1973 | 629 | 20 |
| 1974 | 669 | 16 |

has been listed on all Spring counts since 1964. No breeding records. Was present through fall of 1968 with 47 recorded on Christmas Count."

Spring Bird Count totals for the Fish Crow and Common Grackle at Raleigh, N.C., are given in Table 1. The figures demonstrate the fairly recent arrival of the Common Grackle as a breeding bird at Raleigh, followed within a few years by the Fish Crow. The Fish Crow has appeared at Raleigh each spring since 1964, and Edmund LeGrand found a nest in Raleigh in 1972.

The Fish Crow is here to stay in North Carolina. But does it stay near water? Harry LeGrand (pers. com.) writes, "I have never seen a Fish Crow feeding around any of Raleigh's lakes, and only occasionally do I see them in the vicinity of lakes. Instead, they are usually seen in pinewoods, and surprisingly, mainly in residential areas."

This is not an exhaustive study, but we have some other inland records. The 1973 Christmas Count (Arbib, 1973) recorded 35 Fish Crows at Roanoke Rapids, N.C., and two at Thomasville, Ga., which is 150 miles from the coast. At Clemson, S.C., a Fish Crow was found on 5 May 1973, possibly the first for that section of the state (Teulings, 1973). On 18 October 1972, there were 178 at Roanoke Rapids, and on 28 October 1972 there were 65 at Columbus, Ga. In 1974, Harry LeGrand found 5 on 23 June and 2 on 8 July, both at Clemson.

Denton (pers. com.) says the "Fish Crow does seem to have followed the larger river valleys into the interior. As to when it moved in, we don't know. It was present at Augusta by 1900 and at Macon in 1929. As to whether it is increasing I can't say; there are more recent and frequent records, but this may reflect more and better birders. The bird is not confined to the vicinity of water but spreads out into the pines to nest. It was seldom recorded north of Augusta until Clark Hill reservoir was built, but now is frequently seen around the lower end of it. The Fish Crow is normally absent from Augusta in December, January and February, but last winter many remained here and 94 were recorded for the first time on the [1973] Christmas Count."

Let me cite two other examples of the Fish Crow's changing range. Finch (1973) reports the first proven breeding record in Massachusetts at West Roxbury. The dump in that city previously had attracted fair numbers of the birds in winter.

St. Louis, Missouri, also records the Fish Crow. According to J. Earl Comfort (pers. com.), "There has been a Fish Crow around Creve Couer Lake for many years. The

other local habitat is the levee area below Jefferson Barracks Bridge in St. Louis County. The levee crows are seen in any season, usually one or two. They associate with Common Crows so we can see the difference in size, but we don't rely on this for identification." The A.O.U. *Check-list* (1957) records the Fish Crow as far up the Mississippi River as Fort Smith, Arkansas, but nowhere near as far as St. Louis.

IDENTIFICATION

If we admit that the Fish Crow is moving inland and does not always show a preference for large bodies of water, we can be alert for it. Identification can be just as difficult as defining its distribution. Consider three standard field guides (Peterson, 1947; Pough, 1949; Robbins et al., 1966): they give the length of the Fish Crow as 16-20 inches, 17 inches, and 15 inches. The same three guides describe the Common Crow's length as 17-21 inches, 19 inches, and 17 inches, respectively. So the Fish Crow is smaller, but the difference is not apparent unless the birds are side-by-side; even then, there are differences in individuals. The Fish Crow is described in the books as being "slimmer," "thinner-billed," and "with more pointed wings." Pough adds that the Fish Crow sails almost as much as a raven and often hovers in one place as it looks for food on the surface of the water.

The best identification seems to be voice. The Common Crow gives an honest-to-goodness *caw* which all school boys know. The Fish Crow gives a short nasal *car* or *ca*; sometimes a two-syllabled *ca-ha* (Peterson, 1947). There is also a description given as *cuh-cuh* (Robbins, 1966). A third version (Pough, 1949) gives the Fish Crow's voice as "a short, hoarse *kock*, closer to a Black-crowned Night Heron's *quowk* than to a Common Crow's *caw*. A two-note *oh-oh* is frequent."

In summer, the voice is difficult because a young Common Crow sounds like a Fish Crow.

FOOD

The Fish Crow has a record of eating eggs of water birds: two dozen eggs of the Clapper Rail (Pearson, 1937); every egg of 20 pairs of Little Blue Herons at Big Lake, N.C. (Pearson, 1936); "Always found in evidence around nesting colonies of southern water birds, as it is very fond of eggs" (Pough, 1949); "Prey heavily on nests of herons, terns, rails and other water birds. Steal pigeon eggs in urban Washington, D.C." (Wetmore, 1964); "They plunder heron and cormorant rookeries" (Pearson et al., 1959); "The devastation wrought by these piratical birds among nests of other species is a serious menace in many places along the Atlantic coast" (Grosvenor, 1937).

Of course, the Fish Crow does not live on eggs alone. He scavenges for dead fish. "Inland he feeds with Common Crows" (Robbins et al., 1966). "They skim water and seize minnows. They dive-bomb gulls and terns, forcing these birds to drop their catches. They forage far inland along the larger rivers, eating a variety of fruits, berries and seeds" (Wetmore, 1964).

In his exhaustive work, Verne Davison (1967) says the Fish Crow consumes plant food 75% in fall and winter; 30-60% in summer.

Denton writes in a letter dated 11 June 1974 that the "Fish Crow is an omnivorous feeder like the Common Crow, feeding on grain, fruits, etc. as well as on animal matter. They do like eggs and I have seen them frequently raiding pigeon nests on top of Talmadge Hospital in Augusta, Georgia, as well as on the higher buildings downtown. Last week I watched one light in a tall pine tree where Blue Jays were nesting. It was mobbed by jays, Mockingbirds, grackles and robins so it didn't get the eggs but it might have if it had a chance."

In July of 1974, I watched two Mockingbirds attacking a Fish Crow in a tall pine in Rocky Mount. The big bird stood it for 10 minutes and finally flew off, with the Mockingbirds after him.

The West Roxbury report observed that the town dump had attracted Fish Crows in winter, but not until 1973 did the birds breed. My own observation is that Fish Crows are abundant near shopping centers, which usually have trash and garbage

behind the stores. But like so many others, I have never seen a Fish Crow eating. LeGrand postulates that they may feed several miles from their nests.

Having seen Fish Crows raid Common Grackle nests in her yard near Zebulon, N.C., Eloise Potter (pers. com.) suggests that Fish Crows might substitute eggs of the colonial nesting Common Grackle for those of colonial water birds when it moves inland. Grackles apparently began breeding in Wake County, N.C., during the 1950s, and Fish Crows first appeared at Raleigh in 1962. Raleigh Spring Bird Count data for these two species (Table 1) indicate that the breeding range extension of the Common Grackle might have influenced the distribution of the Fish Crow.

Harry LeGrand (pers. com.) notes that both species nest in tall pines, often in residential areas. Grackles become abundant in Raleigh in late February, and Fish Crows arrive in early to mid-March, leaving in November.

NESTS

Nests are found in American holly; black, live, and pin oak; loblolly, pitch, and slash pine; and red cedar (Davison, 1967). "Nests may be high in deciduous trees in swamp woodlands, or lower in clumps of hollies, cedars or pines near the coast" (Pough, 1949). In Georgia (Burleigh, 1958), the nest frequently is built near the coast in a live oak 10 or 12 feet from the ground, but nests in Augusta and Thomson were in the tops of loblolly pines, fully 50 feet from the ground. Edmund LeGrand found a nest in a medium-height pine grove in residential Raleigh.

It is evident that more information is needed about the Fish Crow in North and South Carolina: complete details on nests and any possible information about food. Such reports should be sent to the editor of *The Chat*.

Because there is so much to learn about the Fish Crow, this report will close with one piece of information which seems to be definite: the bird's name. From the remarkable *Words for Birds* (Gruson, 1972), we learn that the Fish Crow's Latin name is *Corvus ossifragus*: *Corvus*, from the Latin for raven, according to Pliny, deriving from the Greek *krazo*, meaning "to croak"; *ossifragus*, or bone-breaker, from its habit of feeding. So, our friend is a bone-breaking croaker, or a croaking bone-breaker. Take your choice; just be sure it's a Fish Crow.

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CORRECTIONS

The Red-cockaded Woodpecker seen at Bunn's Lake by Ricky Davis on 24 November 1974 (*Chat*, 39:27, March 1975) was in Franklin County rather than Wake. The lake is formed by a dam on Moccasin Creek, the course of which is the Wake-Franklin county line for a considerable distance. The line runs approximately down the middle of the lake with the eastern shore being in Franklin County and the western in Wake. The county markers were moved during road construction, thus causing Davis to become confused about the location of the site. Incidentally, the newly opened four-lane US 64 cuts across the northern end of Bunn's Lake.

Because of an error in the paste-up of camera-ready copy, the birds are not listed in A.O.U. *Check-list* order in the table for "Distribution and Abundance of the Wood Warblers in North Carolina During the Spring, Nesting, and Fall Seasons" (LeGrand, *Chat*, 39:45-54). The last 10 species (Yellow-throated Warbler through Louisiana Water-thrush) should have been placed between the Blackburnian and Kentucky Warblers. The Editor regrets this unfortunate error and apologizes to the author, who had no opportunity to read proof on this portion of his paper.—EFP