



# CROWS: ARE THEY REALLY THE VILLAINS WE THINK THEY ARE?

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Crows get blamed for everything from songbird declines to attacks on humans to even the theft of murder weapons! No other bird seems to attract as much negative attention as the crow, but are they really the evil villain many people think they are?

There are two observable phenomena involving crows in Vancouver, BC – the first is the massive roost in Burnaby, which occurs every fall and winter. The second is crow attacks on people, which occasionally happen during the breeding season.

## **Roosts:**

Crows congregate in large numbers in the winter, sleeping in communal roosts. These roosts can range from a few hundred up to 2 million crows. Some have been forming in the same general area for well over 100 years. In addition, roosts moving into urban areas were, in all likelihood, roosting there long before the urban sprawl began expanding over the last few decades.

No one knows for sure why crows co-



nvene like this, but there are several theories. The central belief is safety in numbers and protection from predators (great horned owls, for instance, which are the arch-enemy of crows). Another theory is that these roosts act as information centres, passing intel amongst individuals such as the whereabouts of reliable food sources. Finally, there's the Hotel analogy where everyone has the same needs met simultaneously, but there is little to no interaction between individuals – like humans in a hotel!

### **Crow Attacks On People:**

Most crow attacks happen in May, June and July, which coincides with their nesting season, the same as many other songbirds. They are territorial and particularly protective when young fledge and leave the nest. If they perceive any threat is near – cats, dogs or people - they may well attack.

This is understandable once you consider the immense effort and time they have invested into their young. They have built nests, spent up to 20 days incubating the eggs, and another 30 days or more feeding the young before they fledge. Crows have very human-like personalities and social systems. Like us, they want to protect their young, which is all they are doing. If we protect our children, we're called heroes – if crows do it, they're called villains!

Crows are different from other birds. Facial recognition studies show that crows have learned to zero in on people who feed or harass them as part of their evolutionary success. For example, if you regularly toss a crow unsalted peanuts in the shell, they will wait and watch for you. Not just any person, but you specifically. If you do this often enough, they will follow you down the street to get more. The same applies if they think you're harassing them!

So, it's just best to keep moving. Crows don't transmit any diseases, and if by any chance you do get scratched, wash the scratch and use an anti-bacterial cream, and you'll be fine.







### **Crows & Other Songbirds:**

Crows are predators and scavengers – they'll eat anything they can get their beaks on, but the bulk of their diet consists of waste grain in the winter and earthworms and other invertebrates in the spring and summer. However, crows are opportunistic and will also eat eggs and nestlings of songbirds.

Interestingly, studies removing crows from an area to observe the resulting nest success of birds showed that the removal of crows does NOT increase nest success nor the survival of the bird intended for protection. Almost always, some other predator stepped up, eating the same number of eggs, young birds, or dying of other causes.

### **Crows Are Really Smart!:**

A study in the UK showed that crows are the ultimate problem solvers.

An intricate test, that involved eight stages of puzzles to be completed in a specific sequence, was required before the crow was rewarded with food. It was a world first and one of the most complex tests for the animal mind ever constructed.

What was amazing about this test was that

it involved different tools in such a precise order. First, the crow tried using a small stick that fell short of reaching the food in the tube. Quickly adapting, it then used the stick to reach a set of stones and deposit them into another container. The process eventually created enough counterweight to release a longer stick that could finally reach the food in the first tube. Scientists had never seen this level of problem-solving in an animal before.

### **[Watch Video: Inside the Animal Mind: Episode 2 - BBC Two](#)**

So, despite their perceived reputation, crows are not the villain they are made out to be. They are NOT a problem to most songbird populations, and they're not evil - they're just crows, trying to live their lives and feed their families! Try to enjoy crows by appreciating them for the fascinating and intelligent creatures they are.

Crows really are captivating animals in their own right. Granted, they may not be brightly coloured, they get up too early in the morning, and they are loud, but their human-like personality and social system are unlike any other. So please understand that it is not a "gang" of crows in your backyard, but a family – just like yours!

