

Urban Crows

The American crow is one of a large family of birds, known as corvids, includes its close relatives the fish crow and the northwestern crow as magpies, and ravens. American crows are found across most of the all year long. They use almost any combination of woodland, farmland, suburban neighborhood and have a special affinity for agricultural and urban settings that can lead to conflicts with humans.



which well as jays, United States orchard, or

Urban crows, like their more rural kin, are good citizens of their ecosystem. Their habit of eating carrion makes them part of nature's cleanup crew. These birds give us the opportunity to witness firsthand how intelligent, social animals cooperate to find food, raise young, and defend themselves. People *can* co-exist with urban crows—you just have to know your wild neighbors!

Natural History

Crows are omnivorous, meaning they consume a wide variety of foods. They are particularly known for eating crops and unsecured garbage, but they also eat earthworms, insects, carrion, seeds, and other foods. Many crows commute miles along established flight routes to forage for food, streaming across the sky in one direction at dawn and the opposite at dusk.

Crows tend to mate for life. Offspring may spend up to six years with their parents, helping to care for subsequent nestlings. Those who survive their first year can live 17 years or more. The groups of crows in your community are extended families which gather into larger groups to roost at night.

Crows are considered to be among the most intelligent and social of all birds. Scientists have observed them making leaf and twig tools and using those tools to catch insects. Crows also plan ahead, hiding food in crevices in tree bark and on the ground in dry grass and leaves. These clever birds may even work together to mob a threatening predator, or even another crow attempting to move in on the group's territory.

Roosting Behavior

Crows have been gathering into large winter roosts for as long as people have been here to witness them. Recently, crows began abandoning traditional roosts in the country for new roosts in towns and cities. Why they moved is not clear, but possible reasons may be the urban "heat island" effect (urban areas radiate more heat into the atmosphere than the surrounding countryside); artificial lighting that helps crows watch for preying owls; and the presence of protected stands of trees in urban areas that make ideal crow roosts, since forests in rural areas are often cleared for agriculture or logged. When crows shift their roost site, they tend to remain nearby. Some roosts have been known to form each winter in the same general areas for more than 100 years.

People living or working near urban roosts may fear diseases, but these fears are largely founded on misinformation or misunderstanding. It is true that accumulated fecal droppings at roost sites can create the conditions for histoplasma fungus to grow in the soil, and that inhaling the fungal spores can cause illness. However, exposure to these spores is not uncommon and can come from many other sources besides soil under crow roosts. Few exposed people ever become ill and even fewer develop a serious case of histoplasmosis. Most serious cases have been in spelunkers (cave explorers) exposed to dense accumulations of bat droppings, and in workers directly exposed to disturbed fungus-contaminated soil or to disturbed bird or bat droppings.

West Nile Virus

People also associate crows with West Nile virus, a recently imported disease that has spread across nearly all the United States. This may be because health authorities initially used crows as an “indicator” species, asking the public to report dead crows so that the presence of West Nile could be verified. Unfortunately, this association has left the mistaken impression that crows cause this disease in people. This is not the case! Mosquitoes spread the disease, not crows. This is why health authorities recommend controlling mosquito populations and avoiding mosquito bites to prevent West Nile virus, not killing crows.

Like hundreds of other species of birds and mammals in North America, crows are merely victims of West Nile virus. While it is impossible to know the numbers of wild birds killed by this disease, crow populations in certain areas may be declining due to West Nile. Once infected, very few crows survive—perhaps only about three in 100. It is important to remember that crows are the most visible victims of this disease, not the cause.

Resolving Conflicts with Crows

Trash

Keeping crows out of trash is easy. Just be consistent in using intact and secure trash containers with tight-fitting lids. Use bungee cords to hold lids on tight, or invest in trash cans with screw-on lids to keep out crows and all but the largest mammalian nighttime raiders.

Gardens

Crows can be frightened away if they are getting into gardens. Homemade or commercial products can be effective, from hanging reflective objects like pie tins or unwanted CDs to installing motion controlled sprinklers or playing recordings of crow distress calls. All frightening devices work better when used consistently, moved around so crows don't get used to them, and are combined with other devices.

Urban Roosts

Where crows roost in undesirable locations, they can be successfully encouraged to move by using humane harassment techniques. These seem to work best when roosts are just beginning to form for the season, before crows are well settled in. Roosts would also be easier to relocate when they are just being established at a *new* location.



Moving winter roosts requires a concerted effort beginning as soon as the crows gather in the evening, and will be more likely to succeed using multiple techniques. If legally permitted in your community, the use of pyrotechnics (firecrackers) is a reliable standby. Other harassment options that have proven effective include playing recordings of crow distress calls, using lasers designed to harass birds, and fogging with methyl anthranilate repellent (a chemical approved for use in bird harassment).

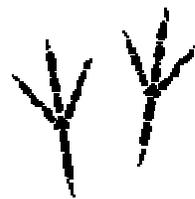
Altering the roost itself, combined with harassment, will have the best likelihood of success over the long term. Trimming and thinning roost trees is probably the most effective strategy and should be done before the crows arrive for the roosting season. Some early reports suggest that reducing outdoor lighting around roosts also make the area less attractive to crows. Simply turning off outdoor lighting, using lighting that is aimed down towards the ground, or using motion-triggered outdoor lighting are some options worth trying.

When crows shift their roosts, they generally do not move very far. Be realistic that there will still be crows in the community. The goal should be to move them away from the objectionable roost location. Allow the crows a roost site with a stand of tall trees in the same general area as the site they are unwelcome and do not harass them there. The crows should leave the problem site more readily if an alternative site they find acceptable is available.

Poisoning is Not the Answer

Increasingly, the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Wildlife Services agency is choosing to poison crows in urban roosts with a slow-acting avicide, DRC-1339, in areas where people find them to be a nuisance or unrealistically fear disease. However, science has *not* shown that poisoning causes crows to abandon roosts. Rather, it may merely allow more of the next season's young to survive due to less competition for resources, and for other crows to move into the attractive habitat with (now) relatively low crow density. Any noticeable reduction in crows at the problem roost would require killing hundreds of birds and would not be a long-term solution.

DRC-1339 kills by damaging the kidneys and heart. Poisoned birds die slowly over a period of one and three days. In addition to its inherent inhumaneness, the potential exists for this poison to harm or kill other non-target birds and endanger other animals who may find and eat poisoned bait intended for crows.



Sources for Crow-Detering Products

Trash

Check for bungee or shock cords at home and hardware stores; marine and motorcycle suppliers; or sporting goods suppliers, especially those that sell camping, boating, biking, and climbing equipment.

Containers with screw-on lids: Critter Can, 800/914-4771, www.crittercan.org

Gardens

Motion-controlled sprinklers are sold by many home and gardens retailers as well as these vendors:

Absolute Bird Control 949/472-4369, www.absolutebirdcontrol.com

Bird Barrier 800/503-5444, www.birdbarrier.com

Birdbusters 800/662-4737, www.birdbusters.com

Bird-X 800/662-5021, www.bird-x.com

Nixalite 888/624-1189, www.nixalite.com

Roosts

Pyrotechnics (be sure use is permitted in your community before ordering):

Margo Supplies 403/652-1932, www.margosupplies.com

Reed-Joseph International 800/647-5554, www.reedjoseph.com

Sutton AG Enterprises 800/482-4240, www.suttonag.com

Distress calls repelling devices

Absolute Bird Control 949/472-4369, www.absolutebirdcontrol.com

Bird Guard 800/331-2973, www.birdguard.com

Birdbusters 800/662-4737, www.birdbusters.com

Bird-X 800/662-5021, www.bird-x.com

Margo Supplies 403/652-1932, www.margosupplies.com

Reed-Joseph International 800/647-5554, www.reedjoseph.com

Lasers

Birdbusters 800/662-4737, www.birdbusters.com

Margo Supplies 403/652-1932, www.margosupplies.com

Reed-Joseph International 800/647-5554, www.reedjoseph.com

SEA Technology, 888/732-2246, www.aviandissuader.com

Fogging Equipment and Repellent

Birdbusters (repellent only) 800/662-4737, www.birdbusters.com

Nixalite (fogging equipment and repellent) 888/624-1189, www.nixalite.com

For more information about crows and humane solutions to human-wildlife conflicts, please visit our website at www.wildneighbors.org.