

Luke 12:24, “Consider the ravens: for they neither sow nor reap; which neither have storehouse nor barn; and God feedeth them: how much more are ye better than the fowls?”



(BY JOY LANZENDORFER) Edgar Allan Poe knew what he was doing when he used the raven instead of some other bird to croak out “nevermore” in his famous poem. The raven has long been associated with death and dark omens, but the real bird is somewhat of a mystery. Unlike its smaller cousin the crow, not a lot has been written about this remarkable bird. Here are 10 fascinating facts about ravens.

1. Ravens are one of the smartest animals.

When it comes to intelligence, these birds rate up there with chimpanzees and dolphins. In one logic test, the raven had to get a hanging piece of food by pulling up a bit of the string, anchoring it with its claw, and repeating until the food was in reach. Many ravens got the food on the first try, some within 30 seconds. In the wild, ravens have pushed rocks on people to keep them from climbing to their nests, stolen fish by pulling a fishermen’s line out of ice holes, and played dead beside a beaver carcass to scare other ravens away from a delicious feast. If a raven knows another raven is watching it hide its food, it will pretend to put the food in one place while really hiding it in another. Since the other ravens are smart too, this only works sometimes.

2. Ravens can imitate human speech.

In captivity, ravens can learn to talk better than some parrots. They also mimic other noises, like car engines, toilets flushing, animal and bird calls. Ravens have been known to imitate wolves or foxes to attract them to carcasses that the raven isn’t capable of breaking open. When the wolf is done eating, the raven gets the leftovers.

3. Europeans often saw ravens as evil in disguise.

Many European cultures took one look at this large black bird with an intense gaze and thought it was evil in the flesh or feather. In France, people believed ravens were the souls of wicked priests, while crows were wicked nuns. In Germany, ravens were the incarnation of damned souls or sometimes Satan himself. In Sweden, ravens that croaked at night were thought to be the souls of murdered people who didn’t have proper Christian burials. And in Denmark, people believed that night ravens were exorcized spirits, and you’d better not look up at them in case there was a hole in the bird’s wing, because you might look through the hole and turn into a raven yourself.

4. Ravens have been featured in many myths.

Cultures from Tibet to Greece have seen the raven as a messenger for the gods. Celtic goddesses of warfare often took the form of ravens during battles. The Viking god, Odin, had two ravens, Hugin (thought) and Munin (memory), which flew around the world every day and reported back to Odin every night about what they saw. The Chinese said ravens caused bad weather in the forests to warn people that the gods were going to pass by. And some Native American tribes worshipped the raven as a deity in and of itself. Called simply Raven, he is described as a sly trickster who is involved in the creation of the world.

5. Ravens are extremely playful.

The Native Americans weren't far off about the raven's mischievous nature. They have been observed in Alaska and Canada using snow-covered roofs as slides. In Maine, they have been seen rolling down snowy hills. They often play keep-away with other animals like wolves, otters, and dogs. Ravens even make toys—a rare animal behavior—by using sticks, pinecones, golf balls, or rocks to play with each other or by themselves. And sometimes they just taunt or mock other creatures because it's funny.

6. Ravens do weird things with ants.

They lie in anthills and roll around so the ants swarm on them, or they chew the ants up and rub their guts on their feathers. The scientific name for this is called "anting." Songbirds, crows, and jays do it too. The behavior is not well understood; theories range from the ants acting as an insecticide and fungicide for the bird to ant secretion soothing a molting bird's skin to the whole performance being a mild addiction. One thing seems clear, though: anting feels great if you're a bird.

7. Ravens use "hand" gestures.

It turns out that ravens make "very sophisticated non-vocal signals," according to researchers. In other words, they gesture to communicate. A study in Austria found that ravens point with their beaks to indicate an object to another bird, just as we do with our fingers. They also hold up an object to get another bird's attention. This is the first time researchers have observed naturally occurring gestures in any animal other than primates.

8. Ravens are adaptable.

Evolutionarily speaking, the deck is stacked in the raven's favor. They can live in a variety of habitats, from snow to desert to mountains to forests. They are scavengers with a huge diet that includes fish, meat, seeds, fruit, carrion, and garbage. They are not above tricking animals out of their food—one raven will distract the other animal, for example, and the other will steal its food. They have few predators and live a long time: 17 years in the wild and up to 40 years in captivity.

9. Ravens show empathy for each other.

Despite their mischievous nature, ravens seem capable of feeling empathy. When a raven's friend loses in a fight, they will seem to console the losing bird. They also remember birds they like and will respond in a friendly way to certain birds for at least three years after seeing them. (They also respond negatively to enemies and suspiciously to strange ravens.) Although a flock of ravens is called an "unkindness," the birds appear to be anything but.

10. Ravens roam around in teenage gangs.

Ravens mate for life and live in pairs in a fixed territory. When their children reach adolescence, they leave home and join gangs, like every human mother's worst nightmare. These flocks of young birds live and eat together until they mate and pair off. Interestingly, living among teenagers seems to be stressful for the raven. Scientists have found higher levels of stress hormones in teenage raven droppings than in the droppings of mated adults. It's never easy being a teenage rebel.

Other verses in the Bible which mention ravens:

Genesis 8:7, "And he sent forth a raven, which went forth to and fro, until the waters were dried up from off the earth."

1 Kings 17:4, "And it shall be, that thou shalt drink of the brook; and I have commanded the ravens to feed thee there."

1 Kings 17:6, "And the ravens brought him bread and flesh in the morning, and bread and flesh in the evening; and he drank of the brook."

Proverbs 30:17, "The eye that mocketh at his father, and despiseth to obey his mother, the ravens of the valley shall pick it out, and the young eagles shall eat it."

Matthew 6:25-34, "Therefore I say unto you, Take no thought for your life, what ye shall eat, or what ye shall drink; nor yet for your body, what ye shall put on. Is not the life more than meat, and the body than raiment? Behold the fowls of the air: for they sow not, neither do they reap, nor gather into barns; yet your heavenly Father feedeth them. Are ye not much better than they? Which of you by taking thought can add one cubit unto his stature? And why take ye thought for raiment? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they toil not, neither do they spin: And yet I say unto you, That even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these. Wherefore, if God so clothe the grass of the field, which to day is, and to morrow is cast into the oven, shall he not much more clothe you, O ye of little faith? Therefore take no thought, saying, What shall we eat? Or, What shall we drink? Or, Wherewithal shall we be clothed? (For after all these things do the Gentiles seek:) for your heavenly Father knoweth that ye have need of all these things. But seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you. Take therefore no thought for the morrow: for the morrow shall take thought for the things of itself. Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof."

