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Praise for *Crow* and the Animal series

‘Sax’s book roams divertingly over the scientific and cultural history of the “corvid” family, which includes the carrion crow, the raven, the rook and the jackdaw, tracing ambivalent responses to the mischievous birds.’ – *The Guardian*

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‘In this vivid and enjoyable meditation on crows in art, literature and history, Sax . . . gives the genus *Corvus* the enthusiastic treatment it deserves.’ – *Publishers Weekly*

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Introduction

Corvie is a gay chap for all his inky coat.

Sean O'Casey, *The Green Crow*

Though common in our cities and our countrysides, crows rarely cast even a stray glance in the direction of human beings. Their calls are not for us, only for other crows. One day, however, as I was going home in White Plains, New York, I saw a small, scruffy crow hopping across the sidewalk in front of me. When I tried to take another look at it, the crow seemed neither curious nor frightened. But, contrary to the usual habit of crows, it sometimes appeared to meet my gaze. At first I thought the crow might be hurt, and thought of calling the humane society or a veterinarian. The crow, however, showed no sign of pain and seemed to be rather less worried than I.

There were only a few square yards of grass alongside a busy street, but it was enough to hold several trees, including one tall pine. Looking straight up through the branches, I could make out a nest near the very top. The crow was a fledgling, cast from the nest so that it would learn to fly. Hardly anybody on that busy sidewalk would pass without at least a glance in the direction of the crow. Sometimes dogs or children would chase the bird, and older people tried to talk to it or feed it. Neither greatly pleased nor troubled, the crow would politely hop away, and this continued for several days. The jumps turned into flights, and these gradually became longer. After about a week, I passed one day to see the crow was no longer there.

Two carrion crows in a French photogravure of 1907. Artists often render the special gracefulness of crows, although few viewers appreciate it.



Actually, it is probably not very far away, but it prefers to keep a moderate distance from human beings. I can no longer tell that crow from others, which might be its children or parents, in the park, but I like to imagine that perhaps that crow may sometimes be discreetly watching me. Rejoining other crows after a brief sojourn in the world of human beings, it may carry happy memories and share these with other crows.

On the surface, relations between crows and human beings usually seem courteous but distant. Yet the importance of these birds in folklore shows that crows have an intense, if subtle, fascination for men and women. When one looks at other birds in an urban setting, such as pigeons or sparrows, they generally seem to be simply biding their time, relaxing and picking up bits of food. With crows, by contrast, there always seems to be something important going on, some domestic drama that is being acted out. They fly energetically about and call to one another in unpredictable ways.

And what is a crow? No image of an animal is simpler, more iconic, and more unmistakable. We think of a silhouette of outstretched wings, a slouched head, and an extended tail against

the white of a winter sky. Such, at least, is the poetic view, but the way scientists see things is a lot more complicated. They tell us that crows are members of the family Corvidae, which also contains magpies, jays, cloughs, nutcrackers, and other birds.

These birds belong to the order Passeriformes, popularly known as ‘songbirds’, even though not all the members are musical. The family Corvidae probably originated in Australia, at a time when that continent was relatively isolated from Eurasia. After the continents drifted closer together, about 20 to 30 million years ago, these birds crossed into Asia. That migration was followed by period of rapid evolutionary differentiation, as the birds spread to Europe and America. Members of the family Corvidae are now found everywhere in the world except for the southern tip of South America and a few relatively small areas near the poles.

The word ‘crow’ is occasionally used broadly for all members of this avian family. It is often used more restrictively for members of the genus *Corvus*, also known as ‘true crows’, which includes ravens, rooks, and jackdaws. Finally, the term may be used, perhaps a bit unscientifically, for those members of the genus *Corvus* that do not have any other common name.

In this book we will look at the relationship between human beings and crows from many perspectives – including those of poetry, taxonomy, animal behaviour, myth, legend and the visual arts. If it occasionally seems, for example, hard to believe that the poets and scientists are talking about the same thing, we can think of the famous story from the Hindu *Udana* known as ‘The Blind Men and the Elephant’. Seven blind men were presented by a rajah with an elephant and asked to describe it. One felt the head and said that the elephant was like a basket, while another felt the tusk and thought the creature resembled a ploughshare. The one who touched the trunk thought of a



The arms of the house of Corbet, showing the raven in an endearingly human aspect.

plough, while the one who embraced the body said it was a granary. Still others, who touched different parts, claimed the creature was like a pillar, a mortar, a pestle, or a bush. The tale is generally told to illustrate how different creeds, though apparently opposed to one another, may all be parts of a single truth.

Of course, we are not talking about creeds here but about cultural perspectives. The 'blind men' here are illustrious poets, scientists, priests, painters . . . And they are not examining an elephant; they are examining a crow. Nevertheless, the same principle applies. All of the various forms of cultural activity are, after all, ultimately part of a single tradition, and together they can yield a far more comprehensive picture than any one alone. In this book I will move back and forth between science, poetry, legend and other traditions in recounting the history of crows and human beings.

These birds are mostly black, though some species have areas of white, brown, grey, blue, purple or green. This dark plumage generally makes crows stand out dramatically, though it can also make it difficult to distinguish individual birds. Black is the colour of earth and of the night, hence crows have often been associated with mysterious powers. It is a colour that can make creatures appear more imposing and more serious, which is why it has been preferred for the robes of priests and, until recent times, of schoolmasters.

Their slouching posture, and their love of carrion, have helped to make crows symbols of death, yet few if any other birds are so lively and playful. They indulge in such apparently useless games as carrying a twig aloft, dropping the toy, then swooping down and catching it. For no apparent reason, they may hang upside down by one foot or execute back flips in flight. Crows in Alaska reportedly break pieces of congealed



A raven illustrated in a 19th-century book of natural history. The raven is by far the largest and most imposing of corvids.

snow off sloping rooftops and use these as sleds to slide down. Lawrence Kilham, who later wrote an important work on the social behaviour of corvids, once took a shot at a raven in Iceland. A single feather dropped to the ground and the raven flew off. As Kilham stopped to reload his gun, the raven returned and flew over his head. The purplish remains of cranberries the raven had been eating fell on his hat, and Kilham concluded that ravens, in addition to being smart, had a sense of humour.

A blue jay, after J. J. Audubon, from a 19th-century book of natural history. This is one of the most familiar corvids of North America, and its playfulness has often made it a trickster in legends.



Foraging on their long, powerful legs, crows can appear to glide over the earth. Then they ascend almost effortlessly, flapping their wings only now and then, into the air like spirits. Though people generally do not think of them in such terms, crows are also remarkably graceful. From the tip of a crow's beak to the end of its tail is a single curve, which changes rhythmically as the crow turns its head or bends toward the ground.

The best known members of the genus *Corvus* are the carrion crow (*Corvus corone corone*), the hooded crow (*Corvus corone cornix*), the American crow (*Corvus brachyrhynchos*), the common raven (*Corvus corax*), the rook (*Corvus frugilegus*) and the jackdaw (*Corvus monedula*). All these birds have extensive ranges, and complex relationships with human beings.

left: A Eurasian nutcracker from a 19th-century book of natural history. Though not a true crow, the nutcracker shares the reputation for intelligence of its close relatives. It has an uncanny ability to cache food and locate it at a later date.

right: A jay from a 19th-century book of natural history. This bird is known for its ability to mimic the voices of other animals, from crickets to humans.



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