

a bird's status and dominance can change by mating with a bird of higher status. For instance, the union of a high-ranking female and low-ranking male results in the 'husband' taking on the status of his 'wife.'

Other vocalizations of Steller's jays also indicate their intelligence. For example, they are known for their ability to mimic the voice of other species. The *Tee-ar* call is a perfect imitation of the red-tailed

Birdbrains—Richard Carstensen

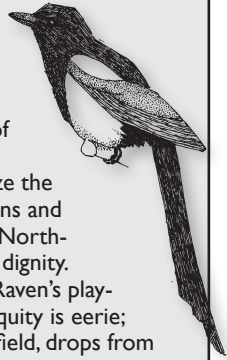
Have you ever raised binoculars to study a passing hawk, then sheepishly lowered them, muttering "Oh, it's just a raven"? Many perceive ravens and their kin as scroungers or even pests, less worthy of attention than proud raptors or dressy warblers.

It wasn't always this way. Tlingit stories recognize the deep intelligence and ecological importance of ravens and their smaller relatives the crows, magpies, and jays. Northwestern mythology accords Raven a sort of hobo's dignity. He's a creature to be reckoned with. The world is Raven's playroom, and every other creature his toy. Raven's ubiquity is eerie; he uproots mountaineers' snow caches on the ice field, drops from mossy hemlocks onto deer hunters' leavings, surveys for roadkills and Big Macs from power poles, and strides confidently down the sidewalk.

For ravens and crows, curiosity pays. Most birds and mammals mind their own business, with narrower palates and foraging behavior. Ravens, however, use every unsubmerged community in Southeast Alaska. Northwestern crows are beach-oriented, but penetrate into each nearby blowdown and alder tangle and blueberry thicket.

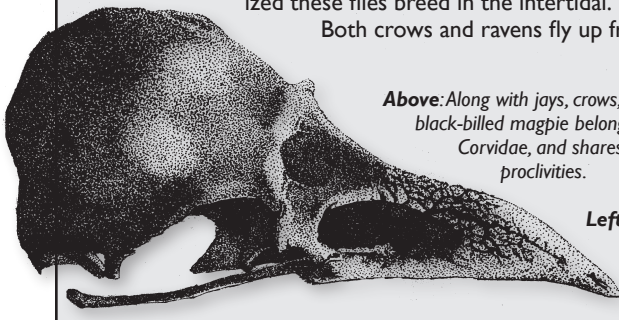
Intertidal ecologists might envy a crow flock's collective knowledge of its territory. A flock may contain about fifty birds, many with over a decade's experience in place, passing on each discovery to precocious offspring. No shell or washed-up fish skeleton escapes their attention. You learn a lot from watching crows. Once, scoping a pair of crows digging in a hummock of foxtail barley, I found them plucking horsefly pupae from their cases. I hadn't realized these flies breed in the intertidal.

Both crows and ravens fly up from rocky



Above: Along with jays, crows, and ravens, the black-billed magpie belongs to the family *Corvidae*, and shares their intellectual proclivities.

Left: Raven skull.



beaches to drop mussels, smashing them open, but ravens are most apt to improvise on this theme, observed to yank down pies cooling on second-story windowsills (the ultimate shellfish?). I've even seen them flying with toxic-skinned western toads. Whether they later dropped and ate them I never determined. Maybe it was just Raven's idea of a good joke on the toad.



hawk. We have noted this call is frequently given by a jay flying to a feeder occupied by other species. As would be expected, the other birds at the feeder quickly disperse. We have also heard them give a close imitation of a bald eagle and a northern goshawk. Once, in a subalpine area, we heard a marmot giving its alarm whistle high up in a tree. Since marmots don't normally climb trees we scanned the tree carefully to document this unusual behavior. Of course, the only live creature we observed was a Steller's jay.

The sex of jays can sometimes be told by their voice. A mechanical-sounding 'rattle' is given by females, whereas only males give a high, muted whistle, usually on one pitch. The most unusual sound they make is their 'whisper song.' This song is surprisingly musical and consists of a medley of whistled and gurgled notes interspersed with snapping or popping sounds run together. The male's whisper song is given in early spring to court the female.

