



Ravens on the Downs

Ravens are a recovery success story.

Wildlife protection legislation and the expansion of their range has led to the RSPB estimating that there are now 7,400 breeding pairs in the UK, compared to 1,000 in the mid-1970s. Whilst they are mainly found and associated with wilder parts of the north and west of the UK, favouring high ground, forests, mountains and shore cliffs they have distributed south and east with reports of their nesting in quarries and tall trees in the District.

Ravens are distinguished from other birds in the crow family by their large size and distinctive call. They are 60-65cm long with a 120cm wingspan, similar to that of a common buzzard, with all-black iridescent plumage and a very large bill with shaggy feathers around this and their throat. Their tail appears diamond shaped in flight and their wing-span enables them to soar with less flapping than your average crow. Their call is described as a deep, throaty 'gronk' or repeated 'pruuk'.

Ravens pair for life and will generally use the same twiggy, mossy, hairy nest for years, carrying out annual renovations in early spring. Once it has found its own territory, a breeding pair will aggressively defend this and its food resources from other birds. They are omnivorous, favouring carrion but also other small animals, birds, eggs, grains, seeds and berries. Ravens can kill small animals, including lambs. Their large size and generally defensive nature means they have few, if any, natural predators although their eggs can be taken by owls and other birds of prey.

Various studies have identified that ravens are unusually intelligent birds, even by the standard of other corvids. Their brain is amongst the largest of any bird species and they display remarkable memory and problem-solving abilities.

Despite co-existing with humans for thousands of years, ravens have an unfortunate reputation as birds of ill-omen, even being saddled with 'an unkindness' as their collective noun. Their all-black plumage and apparent fondness for lurking around gallows and battlefields probably contributed to this. Ravens occur in the folklore and myths of many cultures. They were the first bird species mentioned in the Hebrew Bible, released by Noah to check if the flood waters had receded (they hadn't). There is a small group retained at the Tower of London, the inheritors of this site from the wild ravens which were once widespread in London, roosting at the Tower and benefitting from the nearby Eastcheap meat market. In Edgar Allan Poe's dismal poem *The Raven*, the bird represents the narrators grief.

Ravens are obviously not as widespread as other members of the crow family in the area, which makes the striking sight and sound of one overhead all the more remarkable.

