



Insider's Look at Grand Canyon

Webisode #28 – Interview with seasonal Ranger Nicole Koehlinger Transcript

Patrick: Welcome to another webisode of Insider's Look at Grand Canyon. I'm Ranger Patrick and today I am with Nicole Koehlinger, a seasonal park ranger at Grand Canyon National Park, and today she would like to share with us some information on one of the most common animals you will see when visiting this national park. While not only is this animal very common to spot out here at Grand Canyon, it is extremely interesting because of its intelligence and influences it plays in human cultures all over the world. Nicole would you like to tell us what animal you will be talking about today?

Nicole: I would love to Pat. Today I wanted to share some information on The Raven. I have a few words to describe this bird; intelligent, savvy, sociable and a problem solver...(if only all humans had these abilities, it would be pretty cool!) So, ravens are one of the most; extremely common we have here at Grand Canyon. Many visitors will ask questions about them because they look like the crow but are quite larger and have a bigger bill. Crows can also been seen at Grand Canyon, but they are more rare then the raven. They catch visitor's attention because of their loud and sometimes obnoxious sounds and their all black bodies soaring through the air also catches people's attention. Ravens are the largest bird in the corvid family which includes magpies and jays...very intelligent family of birds. These birds are found all throughout the world in climates ranging from deserts to mountains, as it is seen here at Grand Canyon. We are standing at 7000 ft elevation here on the rim where ravens thrive, while they also can be found down at the very bottom of Grand Canyon much lower in elevation with a much different environment and climate. Ravens are social birds. They tend to form groups where ever they inhabit and will generally fly in flocks. They are a prominent feature in our society and culture as well as across the globe. Many times they are associated with urbanized settings where they are seen scouring the streets for bits of food or scavenging through dumpsters. Here at GRCA they can be seen anywhere in the park from the village area all the way down to the Colorado River and phantom ranch. They eat pretty much anything from nuts, insects, carrion and small animals like rodents.

Patrick: You know Nicole, here at the canyon we have some birds that can commonly get mistaken for another one because of the vast distances in the canyon. How do you explain to visitors to tell the difference between the birds here?

Nicole: That's a good question, Pat. Because of the large and boundless areas here at the canyon, it can be pretty difficult to decipher the birds you are looking at. Ravens get mistaken for turkey vultures and even the endangered and much bigger CA condor! If you see a black flying object at a distance, the easiest way I can tell what kind of bird it is, is by the way it flies. Ravens are acrobatic fliers and will perform stunts. They can be seen flying upside down, doing barrel rolls, and making flips all in the air. Pretty cool! Ravens will also flap their wings quite a bit when they fly compared to the TV and condor that soar through the air. While their flying ability is a good indicator of what kind of bird it is, their size is next. The raven has a wingspan of 4ft, the Turkey Vulture 6 ft, and at an amazing 9.5ft California condor. So if you see a flying object out in the canyon, flight and size are good ways to tell these birds apart.

Patrick: Now you mentioned they are intelligent birds, just how smart are they?

Nicole: Ravens are recognized as one of the most intelligent birds on the planet. They have a decision making ability which sets them apart from most birds. What makes them so smart? Ravens have one of the largest brains of any bird as well as a relatively high number of brain cells. Biologists have found ravens and crows have a portion in their forebrain which, compared to other birds is enlarged. This portion of the brain is associated with intelligence. These birds have capacity to make over 30 calling noises which are said to allow them to express emotions, kind of like humans. One distinguishing factor setting them apart from other birds is their ability to make tools. Crows and ravens in certain parts of the world have learned to use a variety of tools with sticks to remove insects from decayed wood. They have the memory ability to keep the tool and save it for later use. In other urbanized settings crows and ravens, they will drop shelled nuts into streets for passing cars to crush so it can be eaten. The American Crow will use hard surfaces to drop nuts onto for easy access to get past the shell. They have even learned to adjust the height at which to drop the nut in relation to thickness of the shell.

Ravens are also known to steal from other larger and dangerous birds by pulling at their tail feathers until the bigger bird turns to nab at the pesky raven. In the mean time, another raven will fly in and snatch up the prized meal. Ravens are also known to follow fishers and hunters for sources of food.

Patrick: So, what type of role do ravens play in the environment and here at Grand Canyon National Park?

Nicole: Many people think of these birds as a waste of space or obnoxious (I have heard it before!) While they can be loud and noisy birds, they play an extremely vital role in the balance of ecosystems here at Grand Canyon. I like to think of the ravens as the garbage men here at Grand Canyon...but a natural one. Ravens are omnivores just like us, meaning they eat both plants and animals. They are scavengers so any kind of "trash", and by trash in this context I mean dead animals, that needs to be cleaned up, that's their job! Ravens will scavenge on dead animals to help keep the park clean. At one point in time, about a hundred years ago, wolves could be found at Grand Canyon. The Raven would work exclusively with wolves, in a symbiotic relationship (meaning both animals benefit from one another), to call packs of wolves to a food source. Wolves can tear open the tough hide on a carcass in order for the raven to chow down on a delicious meal. Now some people say this is the raven's ability to manipulate other animals by letting them do the work to get to a food source...either way both animals benefit by getting a yummy treat. Here at Grand Canyon ravens help in keeping rodent numbers in balance. In more urbanized settings, they help in cleaning up our accidental road kill sites.

Patrick: The stuff you have shared Nicole is amazing. I did not know all that stuff about ravens. But, as we close the show here, do you have any last remarks you would like to give to the people who are listening?

Nicole: Yes my hope for today and the time I have spent with you is that when a visitor comes to Grand Canyon National Park and they see a raven flying throughout the canyon, my hope is that they see more than just a big black, noisy bird. So, when you make your visit to Grand Canyon make sure to pay special attention to the ravens, flying throughout the canyon because they are more than just a loud bird!

Patrick: Nicole, thank you for so much for sharing all this about the raven and thanks for being on the show.

Nicole: Ya, thank you Pat.