Ravens' Aggressive Behavior is Unexpected

CLEVER, PERSISTENT, AND INTELLIGENT are words that come to mind when thinking of ravens. These silky black birds with large heads and sharp beaks have sparked countless pieces of literature, artwork and legends. They are known for their boldness, loud caws and their ability to adapt. A couple of ravens at the North Cascades National Park Visitor Center, however, are gaining a reputation for aggressive antics.

The antics began in May 2006 when an unusually riled raven showed up at the Visitor Center and starting pounding on the glass windows with its beak. After pounding for a while, the bird disappeared—only to return later with another mischievous raven. The ravens demolished bird kites and tore rubber from windshield wipers on cars parked near the Visitor Center. They have not, however, posed any threats to visitors or staff.

Their aggressive nature has surprised park staff—not that ravens are known for a meek temperament. Ravens, which are the largest member of the corvid or jay, magpie, and crow family, frequently scavenge through dumpsters and tear apart road-kill. They do not usually, however, act as impetuously as they have recently at the Visitor Center.

Their behavior provoked park researchers to begin monitoring ravens in the area. Researchers have tagged two pairs of ravens—one in the Diablo Dam area and the other at the Visitor Center. They hope the monitoring will help them better understand the rare behavior.

For further reading, see *In the Company of Crows and Ravens* by John M. Marzluff and Tony Angell.

Up-close with the Raven

Family: Corvidae
Life Span: 13 years in wild, 40-80 years in captivity
Height/Weight: About two feet/ four pounds
Breeding: Lays three to seven eggs, incubation lasts 20 to 25 days
Habitat: Diverse areas: forests, grasslands, deserts, mountains and human-occupied areas
Food: Omnivorous, eating a diverse diet; near people, anything from road-kill to leftover pizza

Upcoming Corvid Study

An undergraduate student from the University of Washington will study corvid abundance in the North Cascades this summer. This initial study will yield important baseline information for park managers to examine corvid population trends. Park resource managers and the student will choose a range of sites for the study: front country campsites and three different types of backcountry sites, including high visitor use, low visitor use, campgrounds and horse camps. The outcome may include a review of potential adverse effects of corvids on nesting songbirds.

Tuning in to Landbirds' Songs

AS DAWN BREAKS with a concert of birdsong, this spring specially trained researchers monitor between 30 and 40 different bird species in North Cascades National Park. Researchers walk off-trail for up to 1 km, stopping every 200 meters to stand in forests and meadows to record all the birds they can detect. They rely on their ears more than their eyes as they distinguish the birds, where they are and their distinct songs. "[For each location] they do a five-minute point count where they write down every species they see or hear," park wildlife biologist Bob Kuntz said. "But, you hear more than you see."

MacGillivray's Warbler

North Cascades is home to more than 200 species of birds, including winter wrens, hummingbirds, olive-sided flycatchers and several thrush species, each with its own distinct songs and calls. Approximately 30 of the landbird species in the Pacific Northwest have experienced significant recent declining trends. In a partnership with the Institute for Bird Populations, North Cascades has been monitoring the abundance of these species as part of the National Park Service's long-term ecological monitoring program. Landbirds serve an important role in the ecosystem by dispersing seeds and controlling insects, and are therefore good indicators of the effects of local and regional changes in ecosystems.

The North Cascades study records the density and frequency of occurrence of breeding birds. The long-term study culminates in reports every five years to present trends that can inform further research and management plans.

In 2001, the Institute for Bird Populations, Western Washington University, and park biologists conducted a two-year inventory of landbirds in the park in which they recorded 116 species. The study also found that only five species comprised more than half of the total number of birds inhabiting the park during the breeding season.

Rufous Hummingbird

The current study is among several long-term monitoring projects North Cascades is conducting. Others include monitoring of glaciers, high lakes, alpine vegetation, and bald eagles along the Skagit River in partnership with The Nature Conservancy and the U.S. Forest Service.

Bullock's Oriole

Other parks, such as Mount Rainier National Park and San Juan Island National Historical Park, also conduct monitoring of their landbird populations based on the protocol that North Cascades is implementing.

Kuntz said the point of surveying is to look at how population trends in landbird species are changing to help determine:

- how human activities may affect species diversity, distributions and numbers
- how climate and environmental change may affect species diversity, distributions and numbers

This information will help improve understanding of the complex ecosystem and will assist land managers in making decisions that affect future generations of birds.

http://www.nps.gov/noca/naturescience/birds.htm