



# WILDLIFE NOTES

## Ravens

Artwork: Pat Oldham

It's fair to say that the raven suffers undeservedly bad press. From Shakespeare's foreboding messengers to Poe's "grim, ungainly, gaunt, and ominous bird of yore," the raven is an image of dark destruction. In some Pueblo Indian tribes, ravens and crows can be associated with bad luck; in many cultures, the glossy black raven is linked to war because it eats carrion.

In fact, the gregarious and raucous raven is one of our most entertaining birds. Ravens appear to respond "intelligently" to new situations and show a variety of emotions — from a delight in aerial acrobatics to the seemingly affectionate love talk of mates.

There are two types of ravens known in New Mexico. The larger common raven (*Corvus corax*) ranges through most of the wooded foothills and forested mountains of the state, and is the largest passerine (perching bird) in North America. The adults, 21 to 27 inches in length, with wedge-shaped tails and shaggy, ruffed necks, are most often seen in pairs or flying singly. They can be distinguished from crows by their larger size and steady "flat-wing" flight pattern; crows have fan-shaped tails, and have a familiar nasal "cah."

The Chihuahuan raven (*Corvus cryptoleucus*) prefers a more arid landscape and can be

found in desert habitats and dry grasslands of New Mexico. Crow-sized (19 to 21 inches long), these social birds will congregate into a lively and garrulous crowd. Their white upper neck feathers, concealed by a heavy black ruff, are rarely visible. Like the common raven, they have wedge-shaped tails, heavy bills, and long throat feathers.

Both types of ravens lay four to seven pale green, brown- to olive-spotted eggs beginning in April and May; the Chihuahuan raven breeds somewhat later. Ravens will often return loyally each year to the same nest perched high on a ledge or mesquite tree.

Scavengers and opportunists, ravens feed primarily on carrion, and also on small vertebrates, insects, seeds, fruits, bird eggs and young, and are often observed eating garbage. Their distinctive cries may account for their popularity as croaking harbingers of doom. The common raven's hoarse "kraaaak" or prolonged "caaaaa" is a familiar Southwest-

ern sound, occasionally followed by a hollow "cluck" or melodious "kloo-klock." Chihuahuan ravens have a slightly higher-pitched call than common ravens.

With its stately tread and loud voice, the raven is perhaps a natural choice for the poet and the playwright. Its cultural associations capture our interest, its exuberant personality our affection.

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Reprint 1995

