

A Fable: A Story of Nature in Your Own Backyard

Once upon a time, in the year 2009 in Newton, Massachusetts, there were lots of American Crows. They would come and pirate suet from our bird feeders. We would see them begin to court and raise their young. That year, members of an American Crow family built their nest in a white pine near our backyard. Their nest was one block away, across Allen Avenue, along the Cochituate Aqueduct. They would make the clucking sounds that warned each other that danger was near the nest. We remember that year because it was the year before most of our American Crows began dying from the West Nile Virus.



Rose-breasted Grosbeak

On a sunny June day of that year, the wildlife in our backyard near our bird feeders began to provide excitement. At 8 o'clock in the morning, a red fox with a splendid bushy tail moseyed up out of our driveway, examining the bushes as he went. He proceeded across the street and vanished up our neighbor's driveway. At 9, a female Rose-breasted Grosbeak came to our tray feeder and was in and out of this feeder for the rest of the day. At 11, a clueless young Cooper's Hawk was klutzing around the backyard, probably hoping to snag something from a feeder. He ran across the ground as though he was chasing something, but there was nothing that I could see.

At five in the afternoon, the story's main feature began. A young American Crow chased a gray squirrel out of the yard, running after it instead of flying.

Why did he do that? A Wild Turkey hen called a Tommie showed up and was minding her own business, poking around under the tray feeder. The same young crow buzzed her head several times until he got her enraged attention. He then lit a few feet off the ground in a nearby sapling. The Tommie ran over to the tree and hissed angrily up at him.



Red Fox



A Cooper's Hawk

He watched. After a while, she resumed her feeding under the tray feeder, so he delivered another strafing run landing on the ground near her. The Wild Turkey raced at him across the ground with her neck stretched straight out, looking like a serpent on legs. Rather than fly away, the crow ran away this time before finally flying up into the sapling. It looked like some baiting was afoot. This back and forth went on for about 30 minutes. The Wild Turkey seemed really irate, and the young American Crow seemed like a devilish child. Most American Crows were behaving sensibly in the backyard at this time, and the turkey never paid them any mind. But for this young crow, it seemed very personal.



Wild Turkey hens, called Tommies

The next day there were two young American Crows in the backyard, frolicking around and jumping vertically up off the ground. After a while, I looked out the window again to see a crow running toward me, hot on the heels of a cottontail rabbit. The crow did not fly but ran the rabbit out of the woods and into our open backyard. As the rabbit got out in the open, it felt vulnerable (remember the Cooper's Hawk) and turned on the crow, raising its head, ears, and its fur to look larger.

The rabbit now charged the crow, which did not fly but ran away. They went back and forth a number of times, with neither party seeming too threatened. When this excitement calmed down, the rabbit ended up under a barberry bush, nibbling on some greenery. Soon, like an idle human humming to himself, the crow appeared, walking along and pecking at the ground. It got closer and closer to the barberry bush. The rabbit finally could not take the suspense any longer, and it exploded out from under the bush, charging the crow that ran away, fast.



PHOTO: LANNY MCDONNELL

American Crow

feed themselves. Both parents would find some edible tidbit and turn away from the begging youngsters to eat the food themselves. One young crow then began to look for its own food. The second young crow would not listen to the parents and followed them around, watching closely.



PHOTO: PETE GILMORE

Fish Crow at rest

the beetle. At this point the young crow ran in front of the parent and hurled itself onto its back on the ground. As it did this, it wailed like a baby bird, "Feed me. Feed me." This prompted an instinctive regurgitation by the parent. The young crow leapt up and dashed away with the beetle, being chased a short way by an angry parent.

I was not on medications when I watched these antics unfold. This is a true story from one Newton backyard.

On a third day, the parent American Crows were present in our backyard with their two youngsters. It was apparent that the time had come for the youngsters to learn to

When one parent found a large beetle and snagged it, the wayward young crow chased the parent and begged for the beetle. The parent turned away and got ready to eat

An epilog to the story is now in place. There are no resident American Crows nesting around our house this year, nor have there been for at least three years. There certainly are American Crows nearby. They are rebounding from the West Nile Virus, perhaps with some immunity to that virus. But our neighborhood has been taken over, for nesting purposes, by a different species of crow, the Fish Crow.

These are smaller relatives of the American Crow, best identified by their calls. Their vocalizations sound like

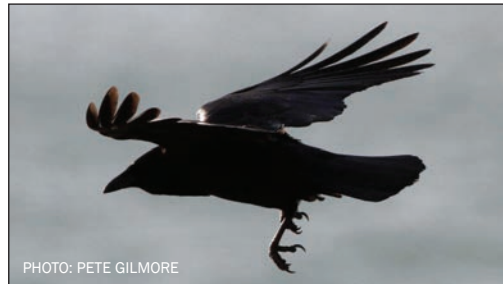


PHOTO: PETE GILMORE

Fish Crow in flight

a hybrid between a duck and a crow. They have a very nasal "Awk-Awk" sound. Our close white pines now house Fish Crow

nesting pairs. Since American Crows steal the Fish Crow nestlings to feed their own young, the Fish Crows drive the American Crows away. These Fish Crows are very noisy and social and are fun to watch. They make me smile, but there is some sadness concerning my old friends, the American Crows, who provided so much fun in 2009.

A parting observation: In order to tell whether you are looking at an American Crow or a Fish Crow, my advice is to listen. The field guides describe Fish Crows as having smaller heads and longer wings and tails. They also have more rounded wings in flight and a smaller, faster wingbeat, on average. This is all useless for me, unless the two species are perched, or flying, together. Above are photographs of known American and Fish Crows. The judgment involved in head size, wing and tail length is beyond my capacity to reliably see. ♦

✿ Pete Gilmore

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