

Gleanings from the Northumberland Bird Database

THE UPS AND DOWNS OF CROWS

By Clive E. Goodwin

I first came to Canada in the fall of 1949. It was October before I had a chance to do any real birding, and I was just in time to see my last crow of the year. To my English eyes then it seemed as though everything left for the winter, used as I was to a large population of resident birds all winter long. It was March 1950 before I saw any more crows, and by March 5 long straggling flocks were flying over, and their cawing could be heard all day long. It turned out that crows were not quite so rare in winter as that implies, but for many years a crow on one's Christmas Bird Census route was noteworthy – perhaps a little like Hermit Thrushes or Yellow-rumped Warblers today. [Ironically, when I visited the UK in the winter of 1995 what struck me most was the absence of landbirds, but that's another story].

Times have changed. But were crows equally scarce in winter here in those days? After all, I lived in Weston at the time, and while it was not so wholly submerged in the metropolis as it is now, it was still the outer suburbs of Toronto, and hence far more urban than Northumberland.

Fortunately we have our own CBCs to give a picture of our winter crow numbers, and they indeed reveal that the birds were very scarce in winter in the 1950s. The initial counts were in the early years of the Club, with the first I have records for from December 1954. No crows were seen that year, and only one on the next count, held in January 1956. The census routes then were far different from the ones we follow now, and a much more extensive area was covered. Gradually numbers increased, but the decade from 1956 to 1965 still only averaged 12 birds annually.

By 1967 we managed 215 birds on the count, but then in 1971 the census was reorganized to fit the standardized circle used by National Audubon [the organizers of the count], and the smaller area put us back in double digits again. Still, the 1966-75 decade averaged 106 birds per count, and numbers have increased steadily since. Between 1976 and 1985 we were averaging 461 birds, in the 1986-1995 period it was 837, and the 10 years up to 2005 reached 1286. Now, of course, crows are one of the species we can be reasonably sure of seeing on any winter birding trip.

Unfortunately we have no way of knowing whether there was an overall increase in crow numbers, rather than simply more of them wintering. My guess would be a bit of both: more birds wintering, but that in turn could have led to more surviving, and hence some increase in actual numbers. However, once we start to look at overall totals we run into the perennial problem with the database, that not only were there fewer observers in the early days, but many records have been lost and [a challenge still with us] not many persons bothered to count common birds. In fact, even today, in many months there are no crow records whatsoever in midsummer!

But now not all is well in the crow world. In 1999 West Nile Virus appeared in New York, and Corvids – the crow family – were particularly hard-hit. Readers will be well aware that the presence of dead crows is being used as an indicator of the disease. Apparently evidence suggests that crow die-offs precede an increased risk for human illness by 2 to 6 weeks, so monitoring of dead birds can provide an early warning signal that West Nile Virus is active.

In 2001 infected crows were recorded around the west end of Lake Ontario and in the south-west of the Province. By the following year there were human cases, and infected crows found across southern Ontario. By 2004 the disease seemed well established, and in 2006 the Haliburton Kawartha Pine Ridge District Health Unit reported 12 infected crows from 42 dead birds tested, or just under 30%, which was slightly lower than the 220 cases from 696 birds tested in the Province as a whole to mid-October. Twelve birds don't sound like very many, but these were just the ones persons found and turned in for testing, which can only be a tiny fraction of the ones that actually died.

In 2004 all this led me to look at the crow numbers for Northumberland, but I couldn't see any real evidence of a decline in crow numbers at that time. It turns out that I may have been too early, because our gross totals for the last decade now do indeed seem to suggest a decline. They are:

Annual Totals of American Crows Reported from Northumberland: 1997-2006

1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006
4753	6376	5481	4799	5277	4935	8214	3693	3422	1365

Certainly the totals for the past three years are progressively smaller than those in the preceding years. But the figures are extremely variable, with 2003 being over double the totals of those in subsequent years, the product largely of a huge flock of 2000 birds reported from the fall. All in all, I felt the figures were rather ambiguous, so I looked for additional support for the decline.

I then realized that, embedded in the annual totals are the results of our own visits to Presqu'île. We count all crows seen on these trips, with the birds seen en route separated from those recorded in the Park. The trips are regular enough – about 36 annually - to provide a consistent picture of the number of birds present, but not enough to totally dominate the annual totals above. Their combined [Park plus route] results are:

Annual Totals of American Crows Recorded on visits to Presqu'île: 1997-2006

1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006
1102	1882	1267	1338	1331	734	881	828	368	523

Again we see the pattern of a decline over the past few years, but this time it is much more pronounced. Using a set of data from a single source like this introduces more risk of distortion due to unrelated matters, notably variations in the number of visits. Indeed, 2002 had only 25 trips, with fewer birds as a result. Other lower years were 1999 and 2005, with only 31 trips each and correspondingly lower totals, but 2003, 2004 and 2006

all had more trips than usual, 40 or more, and yet this was the period when numbers seem to show a marked drop off – by some 40% - and if the very low counts of 2006 are any indication the decline is continuing. In fact, it would be rather surprising if crows hadn't declined as a result of West Nile, but all this is too recent to give us a real picture of the impact of the disease.

In the case of House Finches, which were devastated by conjunctivitis some years back, the collapse of the population appears to have stabilized, but numbers are still below their former levels. However, that situation was different in that the disease spread from bird to bird, and hence the size of the House Finch flocks could well have had a relationship to the impact of disease. As West Nile is mosquito-borne the conditions are different, so we can only wait to see what the future holds. Crows may not be everyone's favorite birds, but they certainly pose some intriguing questions!