

Ravens, People and Other Predators

By Larry Hyslop



A Raven at Agua Point, Bryce Canyon National Park

A pair of ravens watched from a railing or walked among the visitors. This was at Agua Point in Bryce Canyon National Park and I thought what a shame to have a wild bird reduced to being a beggar. A bird so habituated to people that they would dart near our legs to look for discarded food. However, I realized these ravens were merely doing what they have done for thousands of years.

Ravens are carrion birds and have a long association with large predators. They follow wolf packs, grizzly and polar bears, golden and bald eagles, even orcas (killer whales) and yes, humans. Ravens gather at predator kills to snatch a meal after the main predator has finished eating.

In Yellowstone national Park, ravens follow wolf packs and wait somewhat patiently to reach the kill. They hop about behind the feeding wolves and even pull the wolves' tails, before escaping easily from the whirling, snarling wolf. They also follow grizzly bears to share their kills.

Ravens cannot take down large game and cannot open the skin of dead animals, so they need the predators. People wonder whether ravens help predators find potential kills, to help themselves to the predator's leavings.

Ever since humans have been hunters, ravens have undoubtedly followed us and partaken of our kills. The Inuit natives of northern Canada and Alaska claim ravens alert human hunters to nearby game by dipping one wing in the game's direction as they fly over the hunter.

A close bond between humans and ravens shows in the myths and tales of American Natives. In the Pacific Northwest, raven is the trickster animal. In Tlingit culture, the creator raven is responsible for bringing the world into being and the individual who brought light to the world's darkness.

No bird is as literary as the raven. In Norse mythology, Odin has two ravens named Huginn and Muninn that serving as his eyes and ears. Each day the ravens fly around and bring back news of the world. In the story of Beowulf, a scene after a battle tells how the wolf and raven made short work of the dead. The Bible mentions ravens throughout the Old Testament and Shakespeare mentions no other bird as many times as the raven.

So maybe the carrion birds at Agua Point were just waiting for the nearby large predators to kill something and provide a meal. Tough luck for them that our kills now days produce scraps like potato chips, French fries and apple cores.

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