

Tomorrow's Bird (2000)

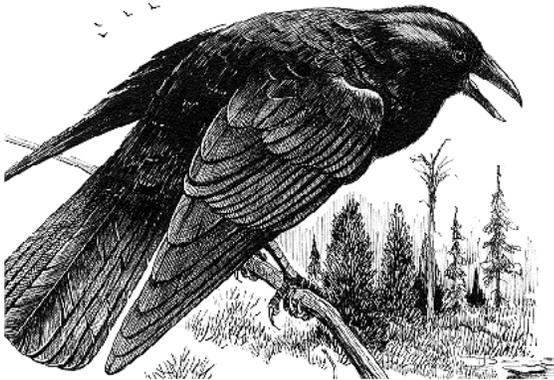
By Ian Frazier

Since May, I've been working for the crows, and so far it's the best job I ever had. I kind of fell into it by a combination of preparedness and luck. I'd been casting around a bit, looking for a new direction in my career, and one afternoon when I was out on my walk I happened to see some crows fly by. One of them landed on a telephone wire just above my head. I looked at him for a moment, and then on impulse I made a *skchhh* noise with my teeth and lips. He seemed to like that; I saw his tail make a quick upward bobbing motion at the sound. Encouraged, I made the noise again, and again his tail bobbed. He looked at me closely with one eye, then turned his beak and looked at me with the other, meanwhile readjusting his feet on the wire. After a few minutes, he cawed and flew off to join his companions. I had a good feeling I couldn't put into words. Basically, I thought the meeting had gone well, and as it turned out, I was right. When I got home there was a message from the crows saying I had the job.



Ian Frazier
born 1951

That first interview proved indicative of the crows' business style. They are very informal and relaxed, unlike their public persona, and mostly they leave me alone. I'm given a general direction of what they want done,



crow

but the specifics of how to do it are up to me. For example, the crows have long been unhappy about public misperceptions of them: that they raid other birds' nests, drive songbirds away, eat garbage and dead things, can't sing, etc., all of which are completely untrue once you know them. My first task was to take these misperceptions and turn them into a more positive image. I decided the crows needed a slogan that emphasized their strengths as a species. The slogan I came up with was "Crows: We Want To Be Your Only Bird™." I told this to the crows,

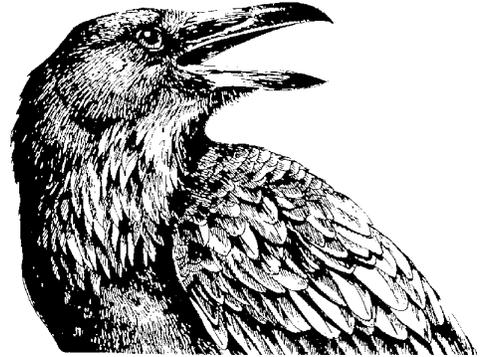
they loved it, and we've been using it ever since.

Crows speak a dialect of English rather like that of the remote hill people of the Alleghenies¹. If you're not accustomed to it, it can be hard to understand. In their formal speech they are as measured and clear as a radio announcer from the Midwest-- though, as I say, they are seldom formal with me. (For everyday needs, of course, they caw.) Their unit of money is the empty soda bottle, which trades at a rate of about twenty to the

¹ the western part of the Appalachian Mountains; extending from northern Pennsylvania to southwestern Virginia

dollar. In the recent years of economic boom, the crows have quietly amassed great power. With investment capital based on their nationwide control of everything that gets run over on the roads, they have bought a number of major companies. Pepsi-Cola is now owned by the crows, as well as Knight Ridder Newspapers and the company that makes Tombstone Frozen Pizzas. The New York Metropolitan Opera is now wholly crow-owned.

In order to stay competitive, as most people know, the crows recently merged with the ravens. This was done not only for reasons of growth but also to better serve those millions who live and work near crows. In the future, both crows and ravens will be known by the group name of Crows, so if you see a bird and wonder which it is, you don't have to waste any time: officially and legally, it's a crow. The net result of this, of course, is that now there are a lot more crows-- which is exactly what the crows want. Studies



raven

they've sponsored show that there could be anywhere from ten to a thousand times more crows than there already are, with no strain on capacity. A healthy increase in crow numbers would make basic services like cawing loudly outside your bedroom window at six in the morning available to all. In this area, as in many others, the crows are thinking very long-term.



scarlet tanagers

If more people in the future get a chance to know crows as I have done, they are in for a real treat. Because I must say, the crows have been absolutely wonderful to me. I like them not just as highly profitable business associates but as friends. Their aggressive side, admittedly quite strong in disputes with scarlet tanagers, etc., has been nowhere in evidence around me. I could not wish for any companions more charming. The other day I was having lunch with an important crow in the park, me sipping from a drinking fountain while he ate peanuts taken from a squirrel. In between sharp downward raps of his bill on the peanut shell

to poke it open, he drew me out with seemingly artless questions. Sometimes the wind would push the shell to one side and he would steady it with one large foot while continuing the raps with his beak. And all the while, he kept up his attentive questioning, making me feel that, business considerations aside, he was truly interested in what I had to say.

"Crows: We Want To Be Your Only Bird™." I think this slogan is worth repeating, because there's a lot behind it. Of course, the crows don't literally want (or expect) to be the only species of bird left on the planet. They admire and enjoy other kinds of birds and even hope that there will still be some remaining in limited numbers out of doors as well as in zoos and museums. But in terms of daily usage, the crows hope that you will think of them first when you're looking for those quality-of-life intangibles usually associated with birds. Singing, for example: crows actually can sing, and beautifully, too; however, so far they have not been

given any chance. In the future, with fewer other birds around, they feel that they will be.

Whether they're good-naturedly harassing an owl caught out in daylight, or carrying bits of sticks and used gauze bandage in their beaks to make their colorful, free-form nests, or simply landing on the sidewalk in front of you with their characteristic double hop, the crows have become a part of the fabric of our days. When you had your first kiss, the crows were there, flying around nearby. They were cawing overhead at your college graduation, and worrying a hamburger wrapper through the wire mesh of a trash container in front of the building when you went in for your first job interview, and flapping past the door of the hospital where you held your firstborn child. The crows have always been with us, and they promise that by growing the species at a predicted rate of 17 percent a year, in the future they'll be around even more.

The crows aren't the last Siberian tigers, and they don't pretend to be. They're not interested in being a part of anybody's dying tradition. But then how many of us deal with Siberian tigers on a regular basis? Usually, the nontech stuff we deal with, besides humans, is squirrels, pigeons, raccoons, rats, mice, and a few kinds of bugs. The crows are confident enough to claim that they will be able to compete effectively even with these familiar and well-entrenched providers. Indeed, they have already begun to displace pigeons in the category of walking around under park benches with chewing gum stuck to their feet. Scampering nervously in attics, sneaking through pet doors, and gnawing little holes in things are all in the crows' expansion plans.



Shriners

a charitable fraternity best known for Shriners' Hospitals for Children they administer

I would not have taken this job if I did not believe, strongly and deeply, in the crows myself. And I do. I could go on and on about the crows' generosity, taste in music, of family values; the "buddy system" they invented to use against other birds, the work they do for the Shriners, and more. But they're paying me a lot of bottles to say this-- I can't expect everybody to believe me. I do ask, if you're unconvinced, that you take this simple test: next time you're looking out a window or driving in a car, notice if there's a crow in sight. Then multiply that one crow by lots and lots of crows, and you'll get an idea of what the next years will bring. In the bird department, no matter what, the future is going to be

almost all crows, almost all the time. That's just a fact.

So why not just accept it, and learn to appreciate it, as so many of us have already? The crows are going to influence our culture and our world in beneficial ways we can't even imagine today. Much of what they envision I am not yet at liberty to disclose, but I can tell you that it is magnificent. They are going to be birds like we've never seen. In their dark, jewel-like eyes burns an ambition to be more and better and to fly around all over the place constantly. They're smart, they're driven, and they're comin' at us. The crows: let's get ready to welcome tomorrow's only bird.