

Crow: A Very Misunderstood Bird

By

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Introduction

A few days ago I witnessed a Crow softening a piece of bread in water before swallowing it. This intelligent act of Crow made me ponder over its unique God-gifted quality. Consequently I ventured to investigate from the Holy Quran and scientific literature about this wonderful creature of God.

Whenever we hear a Crow's sound, the first thing that comes in our mind is that he is an ugly, annoying and noisy bird. However, the Holy Quran mentions the Crow as a 'teacher' who taught man how best to bury his dead.

Crows in the light of Holy Books

In the Holy Quran:

"Then Allah sent a Ravan (Crow) which scratched in the ground, that He might show him how to hide the corpse of his brother. He said: 'Woe is me! Am I not able to be even like this Ravan so that I may hide the corpse of my brother?' and then he became regretful." (Al Maidah-32) ^[1]

In the Bible:

"And He said to His disciples, "Therefore I tell you, do not be anxious about your life, what you shall eat, nor about your body, what you shall put on. For life is more than food, and the body more than clothing. Consider the ravens: they neither sow nor reap, they have neither storehouse nor barn, and yet God feeds them. Of how much more value you are than the birds!" (Luke 12:22-24 RSV) ^[2]

In the Holy Quran we can see that a Crow has been shown to the humans as an exemplary teacher. Allah used Crow to teach Qabeel, Adam's elder son about how to take care of the dead body of Habel; his younger brother. The Crow, by digging the earth and burying the body of another Crow, showed Qabeel to bury the dead body of his brother. This burial custom is the commonest practice which is followed by major religions of the world i.e. Christianity, Islam and Judaism. Present day scientific evidence has shown this as the best form of burial practice.

In the Bible, Prophet Jesus ^{as} advised his followers to be firm in faith. God who is the sustainer of all, feeds even the raven (Crow) who can *"neither sow nor reap"* and *"have neither store house nor barn"*.

This positive attribute of the Crow as mentioned in the Holy Quran compelled us to investigate if there are other positive qualities in the Crow. Review of literature has revealed some amazing intelligent qualities not commonly known to us.

Crow, the user of tools

Crows are among the few of non-primates well known to invent new tools by modifying existing ones. They have been intensively studied recently because of

their ability to use their own manufactured tools in day to day search for food. These tools include knives like object, cut from stiff stalks of leaves and grass.^[3] In Japan, Crows have been found dropping nuts into a trafficked street and waiting for a car to crush them open for them.^[4] Due to its ability to make tools, these birds have gained attention of many researchers and it was found that they use a larger variety of tools than those known previously. Bending, plucking and smoothing grass stems and twigs to acquire a variety of foodstuffs is a very common event.^[5]

Crows are the only non human species known to impulsively make tools from materials it does not encounter in the wild.



Figure 1: (a) Crow using stick as a tool to get an insect out of the hole. (b) Crow bends a wire to get food out of tube ^[6]

One such experiment, conducted by a team of researchers in Auckland, involved putting food in a box out of the reach of Crows. They were given a stick too short to reach the food. But they could use that stick to retrieve a longer stick from another box which could then be used to retrieve the food. This experiment was successfully solved by six out of seven birds on their first attempt. This complex procedure resulted that a Crow could use tools on non food materials. The Crows also use tools to investigate potentially dangerous objects. ^[7]



Figure 2: Crow using a stick to investigate a spider ^[7]

An accomplished learner

Crows have excellent learning skills. They don't just cram like parrots but they think from their 'minds' and try to solve problems. The Crows in Queensland, Australia have learned to eat the deadly cane toad. When a Crow catches the toad, it flips the toad on its back and violently stabs its throat, where the skin is thinner, hence allowing the Crow to access the non-toxic innards.^[8]

Crows have been trained to deposit the coins mistakenly dropped by humans, in exchange for peanuts and other eatables. Researchers are now experimenting that how flexibly Crows can learn other tasks like collecting garbage, sorting through discarded electronics or maybe even search and rescue.^[9]



Figure 3: Crows using vending machine by putting a penny and getting peanuts in return ^[10]

Crows imitate humans and learn from observing us. They have been found baiting to catch fish. One Hooded Crow was observed shredding a piece of bread and dropping the crumbs into the water. Then he waited for the fish and when fish arrived, he stuck its head in the water and grabbed a fish. ^[11]

Crows have been found sitting on ants nest, allowing them to dose them with formic acid, which is a natural pesticide, thus helping themselves of getting rid of parasites.

Incredible 'memory'

Crows have the incredible precise and long lasting ability to recognize one individual human from another by differentiating its facial features.^[12] We humans cannot generally tell individual Crows apart; however Crows have been

shown to have the ability to visually recognize individual humans, and to transmit information to other about "bad" humans by squawking.^[13]

The researchers concluded that the reason why Crows recognize humans is because their survival depends on it. Crows have to learn who the friendly and unfriendly people are, as one person might feed them, another shoot them.^[14]

The social bird

Crows are sociable birds. They tend to form social groups, and this can be seen particularly in the case of rooks, which stay in their flocks all year round, calling to each during emergencies and at flock roosting times at night. Crows prefer to live in colonies. And in a colony there is a head bird and hierarchical social packing order in which every bird knows all the other birds and their relation to them. Ravens, form groups as juveniles, pairing off into lifelong monogamous and extremely territorial relationships.^[15] The female incubates the eggs and the male is responsible for feeding her during this time and once the eggs are hatched, both the parents feed the young.

One civil partner

Crows engage themselves with only one life partner and they stick to it for their whole life. Each pair defends its territory vigorously, around their nests. If one from the couple is killed or dies due to some disease, the other will never form a family with any other Crow and will live the rest of its life alone. This monogamous behavior of the Crows has developed a lot of interest among the researchers.

Preparation for shortage

Lawrence Kilham^[16] writes that when the prey is very abundant, especially in wet years, Crows stored cat fish and other larger prays than what they could eat at any one time. They were able to hide extremely large items and had no difficulty in recovering what they had stored previously. They stored food on both trees and on ground, depending upon the type of the food.

Observational learning

Using rewards to reinforce responses is often used in laboratories to train animals and also to test their intelligence. However, the ability of animals to learn by observation and imitation is considered more significant. And for this reason, Crows are considered the smartest of all. They have been noted for their ability to learn from humans by observing our routines and activities. One would have found a Crow "spying" on him while he is performing his daily rituals.^[17] They create certain tools by cleverly observing the situation and then passing

these innovations on to other individuals in the cultural groups. Young Crows learn to discriminate among people by watching their parents discriminate.^[18]

Helpful Attitude

Crows are the birds with very helpful attitude. The young ones help each other by staying in groups and protecting one another from any expected danger. If a pair finds any trouble in building a nest or looking after the newly born, they call upon their fellow Crows to help them with that situation. If a Crow finds a way to solve a problem he makes sure that the others learn from his knowledge and get benefit from it. A caged raven was helped to escape by the help of two wild ravens who dug the hole in the cage from outside while the caged one dug out from inside the cage,^[19] hence concluding that the birds care for one another and also communicate with one another.

Learning from past

Till so far from our discussion this thing is obvious that Crows are smartest of all birds. They have a strong memory and they also use memories from their past experiences to plan about what's coming ahead of them. Crows with past experiences of pilfering food catches collected by other Crows, and then uses this prior knowledge to protect their own catches. If a habitual thief is observed burying its catch, it would later go back to that place and move its food when no one else is watching.

Conclusion

The Holy Quran is an amazing Book. A bird, like Crow, is despised all over for its ugliness, color and voice. This Book mentions in a positive sense the teaching quality of a Crow; *'how to hide the corpse of his brother'*? Learning from this unique quality we are forced to extend our search for other qualities of Crow. One realizes that this misunderstood bird is not only a great teacher but also a tool user, a perfect learner, holds incredible recognition, extremely sociable bird, engages in a monogamous relationship, stores food during shortage, a great observer, possess a very helpful attitude and learns from past experience. These positive attributes bear testimony to the wisdom and truth of the Holy Quran. It also testifies that in His creation we "see" an incredible bird, though despised by many, is a marvel for those who ponder!

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