

A new contributor to Wildlife Notes this month.

Stone the Crows!

Small boys used to be employed to throw stones at crows, although technically correct, the birds feeding on fields are usually mixed flocks of rooks and jackdaws, the ones we see performing aerial acrobatics on stormy days or making their way home to communal roosts at sunset. Small boys, scarecrows and farming go back a long way. The ancient Greeks made wooden scarecrows; in Japan the kakashi was said to be possessed by the mountain god in the spring which returns to the underworld in winter when the kakashi is burnt. In Europe there is no evidence to link scarecrows to pre-Christian beliefs, but 19th century love of folkloric rituals has tried to shroud them in pagan mystery. When you see birds perched on scarecrows you do wonder how effective they are, but we have a lot of fun making them.



Although rooks are said to be pests they eat many agricultural pests such as leather jackets and the larval stages of crane flies and cockchafers. Verified reports from the 19th century detail thousands of rooks descending on a locust swarm in Shropshire, a plague of caterpillars near Keswick, and in Scotland in 1891-93 a plague of voles with rooks again flying to the rescue. A report on the origins of the vole plague concluded that the elimination of predators such as rooks may have been partly responsible for the problem. As well as pest control rooks aerate the soil as they feed, stabbing their strong beaks into the top soil; there is evidence of this in my own garden and large muddy footprints on the bird feeders too!

The crow family are long lived, 20 is thought to be average for wild birds, and rooks are the most gregarious, nesting, feeding and playing together. Crows are songbirds - anyone within earshot of a rookery, particularly when they're feeding chicks, will certainly question the musicality of their singing. J H Salter recorded when birds started their spring songs and he described rooks as coquetting. There is one rook which practices his flirting from early winter in a tall tree near my garden, I can hear him on this beautiful spring morning as I write. As well as fluffing out his feathers and bowing and bobbing, he chuckles, burbles and gurgles with none of the harsher notes we usually associate with them. I hope he is as good at nest building and parenting as he is at flirting.

RP