

A contribution from a different source this month:

## Ravens in our imagination

Ravens are big, black, shaggy scavengers, not the most obvious birds to have supernatural associations to my 21<sup>st</sup> century sensibility. *When ravens are lost or leave the Tower of London the kingdom will fall*, is a later addition to a myth with earlier Welsh origins. Bran, Celtic for Raven, was a deity included in the Mabinogion, a collection of medieval Welsh tales. When mortally wounded he ordered his followers to cut off his head and bury it on the White Mount, part of the Tower of London, where it kept away all invaders until it was finally unearthed. The ravens Huginn (Thought) and Muninn (Memory) are companions of Odin, the Norse god of war. In Japan the raven is an expression of family affection and a messenger of the gods. In the US Northwest coast mythology Raven is the powerful figure that transformed the world, created the land, released the people from a cockleshell and brought them fire. Raven stole the light and brought it out to light up the world, hence its reputation as a trickster.



As a scavenger its association with death and war is obvious, although rather than ill omen its sense of smell leads it to a potential meal. It was reported in 1871 that two ravens followed the closed coffins of two children, yet it has taken many years of painstaking research to start to map birds' sense of smell. Ravens were once common in towns and cities, clearing up after people, now we see them as country dwellers. They live up to 40 years, mate for life and hold and defend a territory, often nesting on cliff ledges. They are tool users and problem solvers and their complex calls include burbles and chuckles. The stunt fliers of the crow family, they perform loops, flips and spins or just drift by on updraughts. In Newborough forest on Anglesey non-breeding birds form a huge roost in winter, up to 1,900 birds have been recorded, making it the second largest raven roost in the world.

Research found that juvenile ravens yell to attract others when they find a good food source in the territory of a pair, meaning the resident pair are outnumbered and have to share the food. Ecologists and dedicated and knowledgeable volunteers undertook research at the Newborough roost to test the theory that roosts are *information exchanges*, with juveniles *recruiting* others to outnumber a territorial pair when a good food source is found. They were unable to determine how recruitment took place, but the aerial displays of dominant birds on returning to the roost has been suggested, and we know birds have complex display behaviours. As naturalist Mark Cocker writes: *With voices like Tibetan throat singers and intelligence comparable with primates, ravens are always doing or saying something interesting*

RP

*PS For a fascinating read about ravens try "Mind of the Raven" by Bernd Heinrich, also "Crow Country" by Mark Cocker. I have copies of both if anyone would like to borrow them . Ed.*