

STILLMAN NEWSLETTER



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THE CROW SCARE IS OVER

-- Mark Spreyer

A couple of years ago, thanks to West Nile virus, many people were worried about the lack of crows in their neighborhoods.

This summer, I've been leading field trips for the College of Lake County and I'm here to say that the crow is back!

To tell the truth, I never feared for the crow or the other birds affected by West Nile. Given that birds in other countries and states have adapted to the disease, I saw little reason to think they wouldn't do so here.

Be that as it may, my recent run-ins with "the bird in black" inspires me to share the following with you.

Honor Society Birds

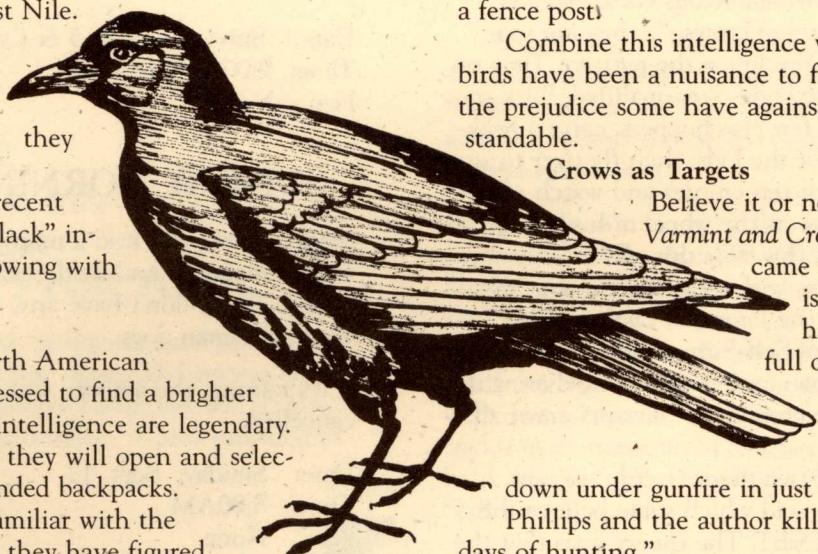
When it comes to North American avifauna, you'd be hard-pressed to find a brighter member. Stories of crows' intelligence are legendary. At campsites, for example, they will open and selectively pick through unattended backpacks.

While crows are not familiar with the works of Sir Isaac Newton, they have figured out how to use height to their advantage. Crows have flown up and then dropped onto a hard surface the following food items: palm nuts, pecans, walnuts, clams, and a young turtle. Needless to say, a crow dinner soon follows.

In one fascinating case, a wild breeding female broke off pine cones and dropped them on a tree climber approaching her nest.

Another well-known report describes a crow that followed a milkman snapping the lids off the bottles.

If the beak doesn't work, it's tool time for the crows.



At the University of Chicago, a captive crow dipped a plastic cup in water carried it in its bill for fifteen feet and then poured the water into a container of dry mash. The bird was not trained to do this. It just put two and two together.

Speaking of which, another crow modified a piece of wood by pecking at it and then used it to probe a hole in a fence post!

Combine this intelligence with the fact that the birds have been a nuisance to farmers, and the basis for the prejudice some have against crows becomes understandable.

Crows as Targets

Believe it or not, I own a copy of *The Varmint and Crow Hunter's Bible* which came out in 1962. The book is replete with pictures of happy hunters and fields full of dead crows.

A couple of the captions to these photos read, "70-odd crows went down under gunfire in just 60 minutes" and "Dr. Phillips and the author killed 1,941 crows in nine days of hunting."

With all due respect to Dr. Phillips and the author, when it comes to killing crows, they're pikers. From 1933-1939, 271, 093 were shot in Illinois. This figure is low as it does not include birds shot by farmers and others not affiliated with sportsmen's clubs.

For the same six-year period here in the Land of Lincoln, 629,800 crows were dynamited. That's right, dynamite bombs were set off in crow roosts. I don't even want to think about how many were poisoned.

While dynamiting is no longer legal, recreational hunting still is. From 1917 to 1999, banding data (for

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more information on bird banding, see Programs below) indicates that of the 1,831 crows recovered, 1,248 had been shot.

Crow Eating

Despite what we throw at them, intelligent and resilient crows persist. Heck, they even seem to be a bit bored with the day-to-day business of survival.

Given their eclectic tastes, finding food is relatively easy. A partial list of the menu at a crows' diner would include: grasshoppers, gypsy moths, cutworms, lizards, spiders, snails, snakes, angleworms, shellfish, millipedes, crickets, grubs, fish, and roadkills *plus* cherries, grapes, poison ivy berries, crabapples and sedge tubers.

Finding a place to live is also not much of a challenge. They like the same kind of habitat human suburbanites do, open landscapes with scattered trees and small woodlots. Thanks to our clearing of dense forests and planting trees around prairie homesteads, the crow species is now more abundant than it was when European settlers first arrived.

Just Say No, to Bugs

So what do you do when the living is easy, you turn to drugs, I mean, bugs. In his marvelous book, *Natural Acts*, David Quammen writes of crows, "...they are too bright for their own good. You know the pattern. Time on their hands. Under-employed and over-qualified. Peck up a little corn, knock back a few grasshoppers, carry a beak-full of dead rabbits home for the kids, then fly over to sit on a fence rail with eight or ten cronies and watch some poor farmer sweat like a sow at the wheel of his tractor. An easy enough life, but is this it? Is this all?"

Then, Quammen shares with us an article written by K. E. L. Simmons from the *Journal of Zoology* titled "Anting and the Problem of Self-Stimulation." When anting, birds, especially crows, either rub themselves with squished ants or lay on the ground and let ants crawl all over them.

Why? Well, there are two theories. You see, an excited ant secretes formic acid which some believe the crow is using as a natural DEET. The theory goes that the acid repels feather mites and lice.

The second theory put forth by Simmons and other biologists is that the general effect of anting is "similar to that gained by humanity from the use of external stimulants, soothing ointments, counter irritants (including formic acid) and perhaps also smoking." Another researcher compared anting to "the human habits of smoking and drug-taking."

Of course, making analogies to humans is, well, insulting to crows. As Henry Ward Beecher wrote, "If men had wings and bore black feathers, few of them would be clever enough to be crows."

PROGRAMS

Program Basics: PLEASE CALL OR FAX US AT 428-OWLS(6957), OR EMAIL STILLMAN AT: stillnc@flash.net TO MAKE RESERVATIONS for programs. Remember to include your name, phone number, and the number of people that will be attending.

If less than 5 - 10 people (varying with the activity) have called two days prior to a program, the program could well be cancelled. So, don't forget to call the nature center in advance. If you discover that you are unable to attend, please call to cancel your reservations. This courtesy will be greatly appreciated.

BIRD BANDING OPEN HOUSES

Watch Mark Spreyer (a licensed bird bander) measure, weigh and record data about our resident and migratory birds. Catching birds is not always predictable, so come prepared to hike the trails. If it's raining, the activity will be cancelled.

Date: Sundays, Sept. 5 & Oct. 3

Time: 9:00AM to Noon

Fee: None

SUNDAY MORNING BIRD WALK

Mark Spreyer will lead a morning bird walk. Binoculars and field guides are a must. If you don't have any, don't worry, Stillman does.

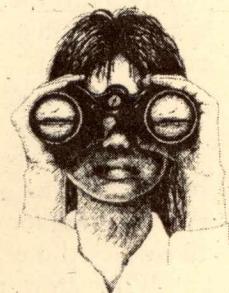
If it's raining, the activity will be cancelled.

Date: Sunday, Sept. 12

Time: 8:00AM

Fee: None

Age: 10 years and up



WINTER HOURS BEGIN IN NOVEMBER

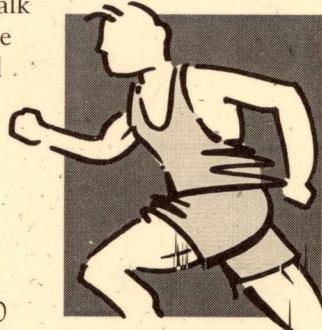
In September and October, Stillman will be open Sundays from 9 AM to 4 PM. Starting in November, Stillman will be open Sundays from 11 AM to 4 PM.

Please note that the Stillman Nature Center is also available, by reservation, during the week to school classes. For more information just call or email us at stillnc@flash.net.

STRIDES FOR STILLMAN

Our 5K Run will start at the Barbara Rose School. Or, you can join us for a nature walk at the Nature Center. For more information, read the enclosed brochure or call (847) 898-9908. Also, you can register at: www.active.com

Date: Sunday, Sept. 26
Time: 9:00AM
Fees: Run; \$20 - \$25
Nature Walk; \$5 - \$10



THE BIG SIT!

With the help of Prairie Woods Audubon, we're happy to host the "Lazy Birder's" field trip. No walking is required. We will sit by the lake and let the birds come to us. Good chance we'll go for food afterward! Please RSVP to us at: (847) 428-OWLS (6957)

Date: Saturday, Oct. 9
Time: 3:00PM until sunset
Age: 10 years and up
Fee: None

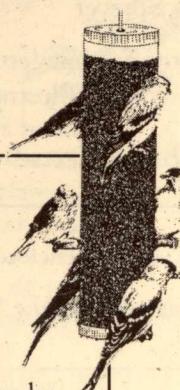
TREE I.D. OR THIS BUD'S FOR YOU!

As the leaves turn color, join Stillman's naturalist as he shows you how to identify some of our Midwestern trees. Easy to remember tips and simple hand-outs will inspire you to open your own "branch office." Come prepared to be out in the weather.

Date: Sunday, Oct. 10
Time: 2:00PM
Fee: None

Bird Seed Sale

The Prairie Woods Audubon Society is putting on its annual sale which includes sunflower, safflower and thistle seeds plus no-waste, finch and woodpecker mixes. You can even buy a wren house. Generally, orders have to be in by the second week of October. Seed can be picked up on October 30 and 31 at Lattof Chevrolet. For more information or an order form go to: www.prairiewoodsaudbon.org or call (847) 622-5321



TWILIGHT WILDLIFE HIKE

The ghosts and goblins are gone but there are other things that go bump in the night. Join us and learn how to sharpen your senses to the sights, sounds and smells of the outdoors. The activities you will do come from the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service's "Watching Wildlife" program and we are delighted to have Cyndi Duda, from the Barrington Fish & Wildlife office, on hand to lead us from daylight into darkness. Who knows, an owl or raccoon might join us.

Casual clothes and good hiking shoes or boots are required. If you have to leave early, that's O.K. Call 428-OWLS to make reservations.

Date: Saturday, Nov. 6
Time: 4:00 to 6:00PM
Age: 6 years and up
Fee: None

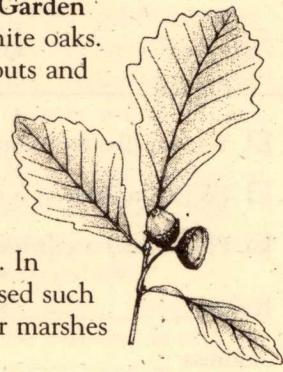
THANK YOU

This spring, Stillman volunteers Daria Sapp, Susan Allman, Mike Levin, Doug Saylor, Joyce Palmquist, Roger Laegeler and Gil Kohler helped rescue prairie and woodland plants that weren't going to make it through the growing season.

Since Susan Allman is N. Barrington's forester, she got permission from a thoughtful builder to dig out woodland flowers from a site that was soon to have a house on it.

In another situation, the native plants that once decorated the corner of Barrington and Algonquin Roads were, unfortunately, scheduled to be replaced with more traditional ornamental plantings. Luckily, with everyone's help, many of these wonderful plants are now thriving at Stillman.

Thanks to the South Barrington Garden Club who donated four swamp white oaks. With the assistance of the boy scouts and our own Roger Laegeler, these trees were planted in the tradition of Native American trail marker trees. That is, they have been bent over to point the way to either the cattail marsh or lake. In days gone by, American Indians used such trees to direct travelers to water or marshes that contained plentiful wildlife.



www.stillmannc.org
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If you aren't already a member, please consider joining us.

- Yes, I'd like to become a member of the Stillman Nature Center. I enclose my tax deductible contribution of \$_____.
- I'd like to help as a volunteer with programs or land management at the Stillman Nature Center, please call me.
- Please send a gift membership from _____ to the name and address listed below.

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