

## Crows & Ravens

What crows and ravens lack in bright colors, they make up for with amazing and interesting behavior. They are not yellow, red, or blue, but they sure are clever! The corvids are perhaps the most intelligent of all North American birds. Ravens are birds that, when you get close to them and look at them, their eyes tell you that they know what is going on. These are not passive birds that let life carry them along—they make their own future! They figure things out, work in teams, invent things. These are truly fantastic birds. We often do not give them due credit, focusing instead on the fact that they are loud, prey on smaller birds, and are not visually stunning.

Both crows and ravens are entirely black. This creates an identification problem, because we often rely on color and plumage patterns as field marks. In this case, there are no colors or patterns to use—the only visual identification features available for crows and ravens are differences in shape and size. Fortunately these birds also vocalize, and the distinctive sounds they make are often one of the most reliable ways to separate members of this group.

In some places the American crow's range overlaps with that of the common raven. There are American crows in Lampasas County. In the western part of San Saba County, what we see most of the time is the common raven. It is conceivable that there is an occasional overlap of these two species in portions of San Saba County. The first question, then, is "How do you separate a crow from a raven?" The keys are shape, size, and sounds. Ravens are larger than crows; they also have a proportionately bigger and more powerful bill and a louder, rougher voice. Crows give *caw* or *caarr* calls with varying levels of nasal tonality depending on the species; ravens have a deeper *Krr-ROK* or *Krraahh* croak that is rich, with a rolling tonality that lacks nasal sounds.

As far as shape, the raven's tail is diamond shaped in flight—the central tail feathers are longer than the outer ones, creating a "wedge-shaped" tail. Crows have a much more traditional-looking tail: square-tipped when folded up, fan-shaped when spread. Ravens also have a much longer tail than crows.

Ravens' outer wings are longer and more pointed than those of crows. In level or active flight, ravens sweep back the wing a tad, enhancing the pointed-winged look. When a raven is soaring, its primaries are spread and look like the "fingers" on a hawk or eagle. Again, crows are much more traditional looking in their wing shape. Furthermore, crows typically do not soar—in fact, they often look like they need to work hard and flap a lot to stay in the air. Raven flight is raptor like—incredibly agile and often playful. Ravens soar up high; they will stoop on other ravens for fun; they shear the wind along a cliff or hillside; they may even appear to do flips in the air. If a big, black bird is doing impressive and sometimes "goofy" moves in the air, it is a raven.

When a raven is perched, its massive bill shows itself, as do the long wings and long tail. On land there is a lot of length projecting behind the legs on a raven, much less so on a crow. The raven's long wings nearly reach to the tip of the tail; on a crow the wings end well short of the tail tip. Another feature to look for on birds on the ground is the raven's shaggy-looking neck—ravens have pointed neck feathers, also termed "hackles," which are rounded on crows.

The raven's bill is long and thick, looks parallel-edged out to the final third, and then the top ridge (culmen) abruptly drops to meet the mandible. On crows, the upper ridge of the bill curves down much more gradually, starting closer to the base and coming to a finer tip than on a raven.

I hope these tips will help solve the "crow or raven" question..