

Appendix 3 – Birds

A lot of birds prefer to nest on the ground in the blocks that you'll be planting, so don't be surprised to frequently discover small nests with eggs. Look in the other direction, and you'll often see various types of larger predatory birds above you, including bald eagles, golden eagles, goshawks, falcons, and a dozen different types of hawks. Sometimes, you'll even see owls.

The only birds that planters need to be wary of are crows and ravens. This is because these birds can be mischievous and troublesome, and they'll tear apart garbage boxes and steal lunches from caches. These birds are incredibly intelligent. It's sometimes a bit tricky to distinguish between the two species. Ravens are usually larger. If you see them flying overhead, ravens have four "fingers" of feather at the tip of each wing, whereas crows have five fingers. However, the most obvious difference is their voice. American crows make a higher-pitched sharp "caw" sound, whereas ravens have a deeper, hoarse croak. Finally, crows have a fairly smooth fan-shaped tail, while ravens have more of pointed V-shaped tail.

Let's learn a bit about crows and ravens, and about some of the most common birds you might see while planting:

Crow (*Corvus brachyrhynchos*) – There are about forty-five different crow species found around the world. *Corvus brachyrhynchos* is the one that you'll see in Canada. The common name for this particular species is the American crow. If you travel in Europe, you might see hooded crows and think they're American crows. They are very similar, but have a different call. Although American crows appear black from a distance, their feathers are actually iridescent. One health problem associated with crows is that they can act as carriers of West Nile virus. A planter can't get a West Nile infection directly from a crow, but the crows facilitate the perpetuation of the disease among mosquitoes, which then infect humans. Incidentally, it's not uncommon for a few hundred people to be diagnosed with West Nile in a year in Canada, although the numbers fluctuate widely from year to year. The disease most frequently targets older people, not planters. The American crow has four subspecies, two of which are found in Canada: the eastern crow, and the western crow. Crows will eat almost everything, including invertebrates, carrion, seeds, eggs, other birds, fish, small animals, nuts, acorns, and anything that humans eat. Crows are extremely intelligent, probably one of the most intelligent species on Earth, and have been known not only to use tools, but also to make their own tools (usually to figure out how to get at food). Crows have frequently been known to figure out how to open complicated buckles, zippers, and clasps on planters' day-bags, in order to get at food inside. A group of crows is known as a "flock" or a "murder."

Raven (*Corvus corax*) – There are also many variations of ravens found around the world. Technically, the raven is a distinct species of crow. Within Canada, you'll only see one specific sub-species, *Corvus corax*

principalis, also known as the northern raven. As noted earlier, ravens are larger than crows. A group of ravens is known as a flock or occasionally as a “conspiracy.” Most flocks of ravens are comprised of juvenile birds, but as the birds grow older, they pair off and mate for life in a fixed territory. Ravens are spatially aware, and are the only animal other than primates that are known to be able to communicate through the use of gestures. Ravens are able to imitate human speech better than parrots can (thus quoth the Raven). Ravens can live for close to two decades in the wild, and have been known to live for forty years in captivity.

Bald Eagle (*Haliaeetus leucocephalus*) – Ironically, even though the bald eagle is the national bird of the United States, there are more bald eagles in BC alone than there are in the entire lower 48 US states. Many bald eagles migrate from inland to coastal areas for wintering, taking advantage of the warmer temperatures near the oceans. The bald eagle is Canada’s largest bird of prey by weight, although it’s maximum wing span is slightly less than that of a mature golden eagle. Bald eagles usually take five years to reach sexual maturity. During those years, their feathers have a mottled brown appearance with whitish streaks (including a brown head and throat). Once the eagle reaches sexual maturity, the feathers take on the solid dark brown body and white head/throat pattern which has made them so famous. It is fairly easy to confuse an immature bald eagle with a golden eagle, due to the similarities in size and coloration. The best way to distinguish them is that a young bald eagle doesn’t have feathers all the way down to the bottom of its legs, but the golden eagle does. But how often will you get close enough to be able to confirm that with certainty? The golden eagle is certainly less mottled in appearance than a young bald eagle, but there are probably ten times more bald eagles in Canada than golden eagles. Female eagles are significantly larger than males. Bald eagles mate for life, and usually stick to one nest year after year. These nests can become enormous, some eventually weighing more than a metric ton.

Red-Tailed Hawk (*Buteo jamaicensis*) – The red-tailed hawk is a very common hawk throughout Canada. It’s about half the size of a bald eagle, at maturity, and like the eagle, the females are significantly larger than the males. Red-tailed hawks are comfortable living in almost any environment, from forest to prairie, and from maritime to urban. The primary diet of most red-tailed hawks consists of small mammals, but they’ll occasionally eat fish or small birds if they’re hungry. The red-tailed hawk is quite easy to identify by virtue of its obvious red-tail, both from behind and from below.

Common Nighthawk (*Chordeiles minor*) – You’re very unlikely to see this bird, but you might hear it at dusk, or just after sunset. It’s found all over Canada, although it is listed as a species at risk in some provinces. It has a small beak but very large mouth, and it has a forked tail. Once you hear its “peet ... peet” sound, you’ll notice how active it is at the end of the day. Sometimes, if a planter annoys it, it will do mock attack dives at the planter, and you’ll hear the air rushing through its wings as it breaks off the dive.

Great Grey Owl (*Strix nebulosa*) – This bird is extremely enigmatic and majestic, and is the provincial bird of Manitoba. It is found from Quebec all the way to the west coast, and can often be seen during daylight hours. They frequently like to sit patiently on fence lines along open fields, and watch for mice or other small animals to run underneath. When that happens, they’ll just hop off the fence and land on the animal. These owls seem to be surprisingly unconcerned about humans that don’t appear threatening, and if you’re patient, you can probably slowly approach to within twenty feet or even less before the owl will

calmly fly away. Although great grey owls are much smaller in weight than they appear, due to their massive body plumage, they stand almost three feet tall and have a wingspan of up to five feet. The great grey has a face like a radar dish, known as a “ruff,” which focuses sounds. Interestingly, its ears are not symmetrical. If you were to remove all the feathers, you’d see that one ear is noticeably higher on the skull than the other, which somehow helps enhance their hearing to track their prey.

These are just a few of the many birds that planters will see in the wild. You’ll see majestic birds like osprey and falcons, and you’ll see nimble little birds like snipes and sandpipers. However, most planters don’t pay a whole lot of attention to birds. If you’d like to learn more, the best source is unquestionably a book called “Birds Of Canada” by David Bird (seriously). Get the 2nd edition, which came out in 2017. It’s a full-size book full of photos, covering over 600 species in more than 500 pages, with more than a thousand full-colour illustrations. Unfortunately, it’s not exactly a portable book to bring planting with you, but it’s comprehensive. The Cornell Lab of Ornithology also has a pretty cool identification app. If you download this app and you’re in WiFi, you should download the large databases of bird calls.

You may also notice eventually that birds can tell when it’s about to stop raining. In many areas, if you suddenly hear bird calls during a light rain, it usually means that the rain is about to stop within a few minutes. Birds are great short-term weather forecasters.

The Hinterland “Who’s Who” website has some good resources about various birds: www.hww.ca

Incidentally, on a completely separate note, if any of you are football fans (remember that several NFL teams are named after birds), you should definitely check out this topic on Reddit: www.reddit.com/r/superbowl

For more photo and video resources associated with this appendix, visit: www.replant.ca/training/birds