

Fish Crow
21 Apr 1995
Mark Twain NWR, Louisa Co., IA
*Kent, *Johnson, *Fuller
IBL 65:74, 66:96

Record Number: 95-18
Classification: A-D

DOCUMENTATIONS

Thomas H. Kent (21 Apr), 211 Richards St., Iowa City 52246
Ann Johnson (22 Apr), 532 120th Ave., Norwalk 50211
Jim Fuller (26 Apr), 6 Longview Knoll NE, Iowa City 52240

REFERENCES

Field Reports: IBL 65:74
Records Committee: IBL 66:96

VOTE: 5 A-D, 2 NA

NA, I don't really feel confident enough to vote A-D on this species, despite the fact that I do believe that this species is overdue in Iowa, and am well aware that it is perhaps as great an error to vote down a "real" bird as it is to accept a misidentification. Size is relative but Fish Crows I've seen recently on the Jersey coast are somewhat smaller and in addition, usually give a very nasal double-noted call.

NA, Although Fish Crow may be present, why aren't there any sightings from other months besides late Apr and May? I am not sure juvenile Am Crow has been eliminated.

A-D, To be sure, extralimital records of Fish Crow are difficult to analyze. Two individuals saw the bird give its nasal call. We now have 3 separate records from 3 different years from several observers and in a reasonable location for expansion. I will vote to accept this record and reverse the vote on the 2 earlier records.

A-D, This appears to be a good record of a small group of adult birds.

A-D, I believe this ID is correct, as I do 91 and 94 sightings. Call at this time of year, in direct comparison with Am. Crow, should be diagnostic. A recording or specimen is a must to clinch ID; however descriptions of calls are convincing.

RE-VOTE (by mail): 6 A-D, 1 NA

A-D, In considering all three Fish Crow records in Iowa, are A-D's unduly influenced by 1) the knowledge that due to expansion of the species, Fish Crow should occur in Iowa, 2) would most likely first be found in the southeast, and 3) that sightings of this species in this area have been accumulating over the last few years? And I agree with the other NA that it is odd that the only sightings are in April-May when newly-fledged American Crows could be giving a similar call, although this is a bit on the early side for fledging (Iowa Birds, 1984). I still believe that a recording or specimen would make a more convincing record. However, taking into consideration the reliability of the many observers and the probability of this species in Iowa, I am persuaded to change my vote on all records.

NA, I do not feel that I can vote A-D at this time. The dates are all from Apr and May. Only one documenter mentions a perceived size difference. It also seems to me that hatched birds

would keep together as much or more so than several adult Fish Crows. Although the evidence for Fish Crow in Iowa, especially in this area, is building, I think we still need more evidence.

A-D, Multiple sound identifications convince me that this bird has moved up the Mississippi Valley. Reports are limited to April-May because later dates preclude eliminating juvenile American Crows.

A-D, In the interior, north of southeastern Missouri, Fish Crow is migratory, arriving in March or early April. In fall it is often silent, so there is very little information on fall migration from Missouri and Illinois. In summer, the call can be confused with immature American Crows. At the very earliest, one might expect American Crows to lay eggs in early April, with most starting in mid- to late April. With an incubation period of 18 days and 28 to 35 days from hatching to fledging (The Birder's Handbook, 1988), one would not expect any young crows out of the nest until late May, and even then they would be identifiable as juveniles. The reason the records are from April and May is that this is when the observers were there to see them. In 1995, the Louisa Refuge was flooded or closed after late April.

A-D, This is probably the best time of the year to find adult Fish Crows and not have to worry about juvenile American Crow. It is highly unlikely this far north for juvenile American Crow to be out of nest this early (Bent, Life Histories of Jays, Crows, and Titmice, Part Two, pg. 276-277). Also at 50 ft. to 75 yd. the observers should have been able to see some down on juvenile birds. This was not mentioned by any of them. Two observers did mention that the birds look on the small side for American Crow. This is subjective but mentioned in the documentations.

A-D, Still would like to hear a recording. Re NA vote questioning appearance in Apr and May: many "spring overshoot" birds disappear after spring migration if breeding does not occur. I believe they just wander off and escape further notice.

DOCUMENTATION OF EXTRAORDINARY BIRD SIGHTING

Species: Fish Crow; **Number:** 4

Location: Louisa Refuge, Mark Twain NWR, Louisa Co., IA

Date: 21 April 1995; **Time:** 8:40 to 9:30 and 10:25 to 10:35 a.m.

Name and address: Thomas H. Kent, 211 Richards St., Iowa City, IA 52246.

Others before/with/after: none at this time

Habitat and circumstances: Mississippi River bottoms

Description of bird: Much of the refuge was flooded so that I could not get to the usual parking lot. I had intended to walk the dike to look for Fish Crow and unusual herons. I took my recording gear along. I was able to take a road north to the dike and start my walk farther north than I had intended. When I reached flooded woodlands on the inside of the dike, I noticed four crows sitting in the trees. I stopped to watch them for a while, hoping that they would call. I played a Fish Crow tape and they seemed to ignore it. After a bit, I began to hear soft nasal caws of one or two notes. I am not good at describing sounds, but these noises that appeared to come from the crows were quite unlike the calls of American Crows that were farther away in the area. I tried to record them, but I got mostly static, which I assumed was due to the wind. Later, when I changed the batteries and fiddled with my equipment, I got better recordings, but the crows were silent. Subjectively, these birds appeared on the small size compared to American Crow, but both were not present in the same field. The tails appeared short and the legs seemed short also. The bill was stout and a bit decurved at the tip. The forehead was flat and there seemed to be loose feathers between the eye and upper mandible. All these features were subjective. More impressive was the fact that this group of four crows stayed together. Sometimes one would fly a short distance and rejoin the group. When they moved in the woodland, they all went together. During this time a few American Crows flew by calling and others were seen and heard in the distance. The birds moved to the back of the woodland, so I proceeded down the dike to the refuge looking for herons. On my way back I heard one sound that I thought might be a Fish Crow. In a few moments the four crows flew in to view and landed near end of the woods. I approached them hoping to hear more and get some recordings, but they were silent and soon moved to the back of the woods out of sight.

Voice: see above.

Similar species: The Records Committee has not accepted two previous records of Fish Crow along the Mississippi River in Louisa County because of the difficulty in substantiating the identification. I was well aware of this, and like other committee members, I believed that they were likely present in this area. I can only say that I was watching the birds when I heard them, which eliminates the possibility that they were young American Crows. I would not want to rely on the morphologic features. I was impressed that this group stayed together in the flooded woods, which was unlike the behavior of the American Crows.

Any one have reservations?: Without a recording or specimen, I have some misgivings. The fact that I saw the birds while they made nasal sounds that were quite different from the caw of American Crows makes me more confident of the identification. It will help if more birders have the opportunity to see and hear these birds.

Light: cloudy, northwest wind at 10-15 mph; **Distance:** 30-50 yards (estimate); **Optics:** 10x binocular

Previous experience: They lived in our backyard in Silver Spring, MD, many years ago, and I have seen and heard many since in the south.

References before/after viewing: I did not review the field marks before going to the area. I looked at the National Geographic Guide after making field notes. I played a tape that involves a group of Fish Crows mobbing.

Time of notes: about 10 minutes after last sighting; **Final typing:** 5 hours

95-18

**DOCUMENTATION FORM
UNUSUAL BIRD SIGHTINGS IN IOWA**

Species: Fish Crow

Location: Mark Twain NWR, Louisa County, Iowa

Habitat: Flooded woods along Mississippi River

Date: 22 April, 1995 **Time:** 11:35 to 11:40

Name and Address: Ann Johnson, 532 120th Avenue, Norwalk, IA 50211

Other Observers: Tom Kent day before; Tim Schantz later in the day

Description of bird: I parked the car at the bottom of the hill leading into the refuge. Flood waters had closed the road beyond this point. As I began walking the road leading north, I heard a nasal "ca" that was distinctly different from the numerous American Crows in the area. The sounds continued for approximately five minutes as I proceeded north, always coming from the vicinity of a flooded wooded area across a flooded field. I walked the levee to the southeast, back toward the area the calls had come from, and was able to observe one or possibly two smallish crows flush from the edge of the water. The calls had stopped, however, so I was unable to determine that the sound had come from this bird.

Similar species and how eliminated: American Crow has a deeper, more robust call. I believe that the date is a bit early for young American Crows (which can sound very similar to Fish Crow).

Viewing conditions (light, distance, optics): Viewed with naked eye at about 50 feet.

Previous experience: Have heard numerous Fish Crows along coasts and inland waterways. Have studied size differences between the two species and believe that size may indicate possibilities but is not conclusive.

References consulted during observation: none

References consulted before completing documentation: none

Field notes made: none

Documentation completed: upon return home

DOCUMENTATION OF RARE BIRD

SPECIES: Fish Crow

WHERE: Mark Twain Wildlife Area (Louisa County)

OBSERVER: Jim Fuller, 6 Longview Knoll NE, Iowa City, Iowa, 52240

OTHER OBSERVERS: Reported by Tom Kent. With me were Dick Tetrault and Chuck Fuller

DATE & TIME: 26 April, 1995 (7:30 AM)

BACKGROUND: Tom Kent had reported four Fish Crows at this location on 21 April. While walking the Mississippi River levee, a single crow flew across a flooded field at an average distance of about 75 yards. It was visible for about 30 seconds. Later looking through trees, we saw 5 crows at about a hundred yards distance.

DESCRIPTION: While flying across the field, this crow gave an almost continuous call which was different from the crows "caw". It was slow, single noted, and a much more nasal type of "cah". The series of single notes was more deliberate, and with greater space between each note than a Common Crow makes. Later, when observing the five crows, one gave the same different call note, while the others in the group were giving the Common Crow "caw". No morphological differences could be distinguished at that distance. The flight of the single crow with the "cah" seemed to be different, with a more rapid flapping of the wings.

SIMILAR SPECIES" The only difference that I can describe between this bird and Common Crow is the call and the more rapid wing flap.

OPTICS and VIEWING CONDITIONS: It was early morning. The sky was overcast, and it was misting at the time. The bird was observed with Swift Audubon 8.5 X 44 binoculars looking southwest to southeast as it flew.

PREVIOUS EXPERIENCE: I have seen and heard Fish Crows on numerous occasions in the south and southeast parts of the country.

REFERENCES & FIELD NOTES: No guide was consulted. Notes were written in the car after sighting, and this form was typed on 28 April.