

AMERICAN CROWS MOVE INTO SOUTHERN IDAHO TOWNS

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The American Crow (*Corvus brachyrhynchos*) is now a common year-round resident in southern Idaho towns (pers. obs., C. Trost pers. comm.). Yet this was not always so. Larrison et al. (1967) and Burleigh (1972) found crows common in a variety of open habitats, but not specifically in towns. Burleigh (1972) sometimes listed a town in his county-status summaries, but this reference represented a general area. For example, for Ada County he stated that American Crows were “apparently resident at Boise” but continued with “on November 7, 1957, numerous flocks were seen in the open fields.” He cited Newhouse (1960) as stating that the American Crow was common at Council, and Davis (1935) listed it as a winter visitor at Rupert; but these authors were referring to the region around these towns, not within them. The only specific reference to American Crows within a town by either Larrison et al. (1967) or Burleigh (1972) was the latter’s of “a noisy flock of sixteen birds noted well within the town limits of McCall March 19, 1967; ground that day covered with several feet of snow.” Apparently the fact that they were within town was noteworthy.

American Crows were not found within Nampa from the 1960s through the mid 1970s while I lived there. I first recorded them in Nampa in December 1979, while Leon Powers (pers. comm.) first found them there the previous winter. At Pocatello, C. H. Trost (pers. comm.) thought he first noticed them within city limits in the late 1970s but did not record them in field notes until 1980. The Boise Christmas Bird Count (hereafter CBC), covering a circle primarily of town but also including sagebrush desert, mountain, and limited agricultural land, recorded only a single American Crow from 1966 to 1975 (Figure 1). The count’s number of crows averaged five from 1976 to 1980, then increased quickly, reaching 110 by 1983. This pattern contrasts with the thousands recorded consistently since the 1950s on the nearby rural Nampa CBC (Figure 2).

Thus it appears that crows first moved into southern Idaho towns in the late 1970s

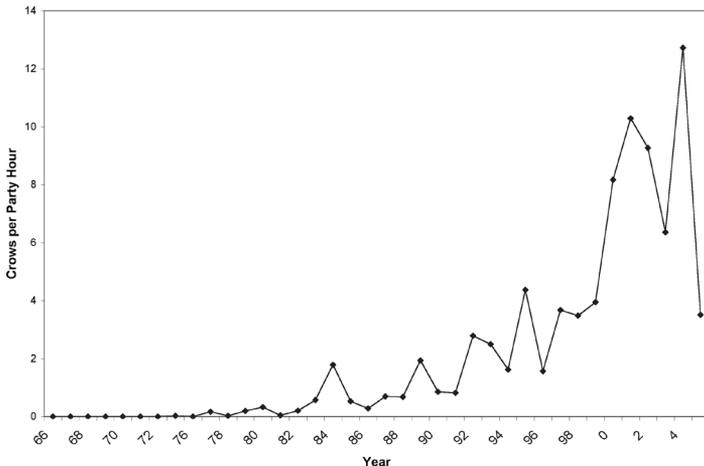


Figure 1. Number of American Crows per party-hour on the Boise Christmas Bird Count, 1966–2005.

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or 1980. Veerbeek and Caffery (2002) reported that crows began moving into urban areas in the 1950s and 1960s and specifically mentioned urban roosts forming in Kentucky in 1977 (Hudson 1977) and in Saskatchewan in 1978 (Houston 1980), a time similar to when they did so in Idaho.

When I arrived at Pocatello in the winter of 1980/1981, there was a winter roost of about 40 crows near the Idaho State University campus. This roost grew consistently over the years, until it reached 800 to 900 birds by 1997. I also observed the number of crows nesting in Pocatello increase dramatically. During this same period Leon Powers (pers. comm.) found a large increase in nesting and roosting crows in Nampa. Suburban habitats, which by the definition of Marzluff et al. (2001) include southern Idaho towns, are favorable for crows' nesting, providing both trees for nest sites and food (Marzluff et al. 2001, McGowan 2001). The increase in southern Idaho's urban crows is paralleled in cities of the Pacific Northwest, where crows have learned to exploit rich food and nesting opportunities (Marzluff et al. 2001).

But why did American Crows first decide to move into Idaho towns? Large increases in rural populations could be a stimulus for invading towns. American Crows have increased in general in the interior western United States in the 20th century, in parallel with the development of agriculture (Marzluff et al. 1994). Rapid growth of crow populations in Seattle was fueled by immigration of juvenile crows from outlying areas (Withey and Marzluff 2005). Information on the crow's population dynamics in southern Idaho is limited and contradictory. The Breeding Bird Survey from 1966 to 1979 implies a significantly positive trend (increase of 6.1% annually; $P = 0.02$; Sauer et al. 2005), but Idaho CBCs from 1959 to 1988 imply a negative trend (Contreras 1997). American Crows were abundant around some southern Idaho towns for decades before moving in. For example, from the mid 1950s through early 1970s Nampa CBCs (Figure 2) usually had from 500 to 8000 American Crows. It is possible that increasing rural crow populations contributed to the initial colonization of Idaho towns, but the historically large populations previous to colonization indicate that other factors were important.

One likely cause was a change in persecution of American Crows in southern Idaho, at least in towns, as had been suggested in Canada (Houston 1980), Wisconsin (Knight et al. 1987), and generally in North America (McGowan 2001). Larrison et

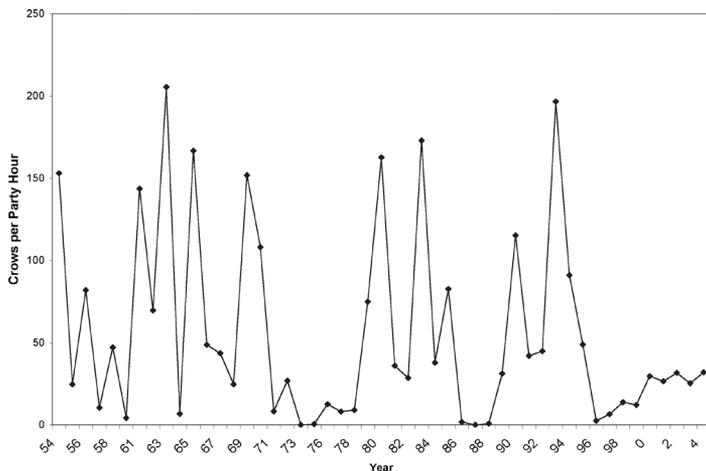


Figure 2. Number of American Crows per party-hour on the Nampa Christmas Bird Count, 1954–2005.

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al. (1967) reported that crows were often persecuted to the point of extirpation from areas where they were formerly common. In the Nampa area through the 1960s and early 1970s they were considered one of the worst varmints, and boys of all ages were encouraged to kill them (pers. obs.). Crows were remarkably wary during this time, consistently staying well out of gunshot range.

My impression is that attitudes toward winged predators became less negative in general in southern Idaho by the mid to late 1970s. This change included crows, at least as far as hunting them within city limits. Factors contributing to this attitude change probably included the 1972 extension of the Federal Migratory Bird Treaty Act of 1918 to protect crows for the first time, and the establishment of the Snake River Birds of Prey National Conservation Area in southwestern Idaho in the early 1970s.

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