



TAKE IT OR LEAVE IT

by Jim Stiles

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IN DEFENSE OF RAVENS (And CROWS)

Recently, the Utah Wildlife Board proposed a hunting season for crows. While they are not particularly tasty and are known for their intelligence, crows have often been blamed by farmers for agricultural losses via crop damage—crows have to eat, after all—and so, next September, crows may be fair game for anyone itchy to shoot something.

Critics argue that the crows do not constitute a significant threat to agriculture and, in Utah, are not as prolific as they are back east. And some are concerned that most people can't differentiate between crows and their larger cousins, the raven. It worries me too.

While a shooting season on crows seems misguided and wrong, I particularly resent the possible assault on ravens. The truth is, ravens get no respect. Wherever they fly, they're ignored or misidentified. Everyone wants to see an eagle. Nobody cares if they see a raven. It's always been like this...

One warm summer night, many years ago, I was a seasonal ranger at Arches National Park, collecting fees at the Devils Garden campground. We went site to site in those days, actually talking to the campers, and while it was a thankless job in some ways, ("We already paid at the gate...

You mean we have to pay again?), there were some advantages to this kind of direct contact. On this particular evening, a woman from L.A. was about to invite me back for a Hibachi dinner, when I was called away by the gentleman in an adjoining site.

"Oh ranger," I heard him call. "You've got to see this." A pair of 7X50 binoculars bounced rhythmically off an ample abdomen as the camper from site 29 lumbered toward me.

"What seems to be the problem?" I asked. I always assumed there was a problem when tourists ran at

me.

"No problem," he explained. "But I think I just saw an eagle flying over there by that big arch."

"No kidding," I said. "Can you still see it?"

"Well, actually the wife spotted it first...Mother! Can you point out that eagle to the ranger?"

She left her dishes and joined us by the road. "Let me see...give me the binoculars, Gil...Yes! There it is!"

High above Skyline Arch I could see the dark soaring outline of the winged figure. It was a magnificent bird alright, but it wasn't an eagle.



"That's not an eagle, ma'm," I said. "That's a raven."

"What? Give me those field glasses, Mother." Gil was not convinced, but the binoculars gave him a sharper and closer view.

"Damn, mother...it's just a big crow."

"Now just a minute," I said indignantly. "It's not just a crow, and it's not just a raven. It is one of the most intelligent, graceful, and fascinating birds you will ever hope to see. If I could come back to this life as any creature on Earth, I would return as a raven."

Gil and Mother failed to be moved by my passion-

ate defense of the raven. "That's fine ranger...real interesting...Honey, do you need any help with the dishes?"

Sometimes spontaneous interpretive talks are an effective way to educate the public about the wonders of nature. This was not one of those times. I was left by myself, on the top of this sandstone fin by the campground road to contemplate the solitary raven.

I wasn't always a staunch defender of the Black Wonder. As a kid in Kentucky, my knowledge of ravens was limited to Edgar Allan Poe, and my grandfather regularly shot his BB gun at the cousin crows that inhabited our neck of the woods (The raven, in this country, is mostly confined to the Western U.S., although they're widely distributed, from Africa and Eurasia, to Australia and Central America.).

But on a trip, many years ago, to a remote section of the Grand Canyon, where the rim plunges more than 2000 feet to the Colorado River, I had my first opportunity to watch the remarkable acrobatic skills of the "Common" Raven. I'd never seen anything like it in my life.

Sometimes in groups of three or four, sometimes in pairs, sometimes alone, the incredible *Corvus corax* performed flying feats that I thought defied the laws of nature. In groups they engaged in furious dogfights and mutual pursuits. They plummeted into the canyon, their wings tucked in to reduce drag, and as they free-fell, they spiraled and spun in perfect harmony with the other. When they caught an updraft, they would reduce direction in a great swooping rush and ride the wind as high as they could go. When they sensed the apex of their ascent, the ravens arched over on their backs, and started the process all over again.

They kept this up for hours, flying and performing, it seemed, for the sheer joy of it. I never forgot the show and, later as a park ranger, I felt it was my job, my duty, to speak in their defense. There is much to say in their defense too. As omnivores, ravens depend upon a wide variety of animal food, supplemented by some plants. They are also scavengers, taking advantage of carrion when it's available (and keeping our highways clean, I might add).

Ravens are believed to mate for life, which is more than a lot of us can say, and some raven watchers report that both parents incubate the eggs (the males must be the apple of raven feminists everywhere). Ravens will fiercely defend their nest against intruders, whether they be raptors or humans. I once read of an incident in Oregon where some nosy ornithologists attempted to examine an active nest. Both parents left the nest when the group approached the nest. But as they were climbing down, the ravens returned. One of the ravens picked up rocks in its beak and hurled them down at the fleeing birdwatchers/annoyers.

But to me, more than anything, these birds seem to have an extraordinarily refined sense of humor.

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Years ago, ravens built a nest on the cliffs above the Arches visitor center. When the young birds fledged the nest, they made a bee line for the front yard of the old rock house, then headquarters of the Canyonlands Natural History Association. All three fledglings and the parents congregated on the grassy lawn and awked and squawked and croaked the mornings away, much to the chagrin of the director of CNHA, Eleanor Inskip. Eleanor was unable to concentrate with all that noise and, on several occasions, ran out the door and attempted to chase them away. But the ravens always came back and after two or three days of being harassed by Ms. Inskip, the ravens shit all over her car. There must have been five or six cars to choose from, but they picked hers. Realizing she'd been outwitted, she gave up and bought ear plugs.

And in 1983, when that despicable Secretary of the Interior, James Watt came to visit the park, all the dirty tricks that Earth Firsters! and other ne'er-dowells concocted, could not compare to the almost perfect aim of one raven named George.

The truth is, ravens get no respect. Wherever they fly, they're ignored or misidentified. Everyone wants to see an eagle. Nobody cares if they see a raven.

George was a shameless beggar who spent his days bumming food off tourists and whatever the park maintenance man, Rocky Newell, cared to give him. I used to tell Rocky not to feed all that Wonder bread to George, but Rocky just laughed. "James, my boy, George doesn't take 'no' for an answer," he explained. "It's better to stay on George's good side."

I don't know what Watt did to violate that piece of advice, or perhaps George was just a natural judge of character, but as the Secretary walked across the Windows parking lot to his car after an exhausting 100 yard hike, Jim found himself a slowly moving target. With a great flapping of wings, George took to the air, ignoring an apple core and a piece of baloney, and headed straight for the chrome-domed Man. At the appropriate moment, he released a white incendiary bomb, and almost hit his mark. It was a monumental effort by the Great Black Bird, and what really matters is that he tried. Watt left the park shortly thereafter, never returned to Arches, and a year later, resigned (some say in disgrace) as Interior secretary. I firmly believe that George's symbolic attack was the catalyst the country needed, the statement that had to be made, to confront James Watt, once and for all.

Today, as on any day, I can find great pleasure and joy in watching the ravens. Whether they are performing aerial stunts, and going for maximum aerodynamic efficiency, or lazily flapping from one fin to the next, with their legs dangling freely beneath them, the fact that they are ignored and underrated by most bird watchers may bother me, but it doesn't bother them...they could care less.

They're too cool to care. Or be shot.

For more information on the proposed crow shoot:

<http://www.sltrib.com/sltrib/news/57865547-78/wildlife-utah-crow-region.html.csp>

BONUS FEATURE:

If you doubt the intelligence of the raven...or crow...check out this YouTube video:

"Tool Use in the New Caledonian Crow"

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lcvbqg2SSyc>

I STILL MISS GENE SCHAFER

I'd been away from Monticello for a couple

months, but one evening last week, after a long, hard drive, I pulled into the old elm-shaded driveway and started to unload my bags. Just then, the siren went off. For Monticello-ites, we usually know it's not a fire. It blasts three times a day, but every time I hear it now, I think of Gene Schafer. Once, just after I moved to town, I was at Gene's shop and, when the siren sounded, I said, "It must be six o'clock."

Gene snorted, "Hell, Stiles. That ain't what those sirens are. You think it means 8 AM, Noon and 6 PM, right?"

"Well," I replied. "What else could it mean?"

He said, "First siren, time to get up, second siren, time for lunch. Third siren? One more hour til the liquor store closes." That was Gene.

It's been three years, this month, since our buddy Schafer left us, long before I expected him to. In fact, I was sure he'd outlive me and maybe all of us. I figured he'd still be strutting around his shop and pulling dead junipers out of the ground with his bare hands until he was well past a hundred. Though he only made it to eighty, you'd have to say he got to be Gene, right to the end.

During my decade here as his neighbor and friend, I came to depend on Gene for his kindness and generosity, but also his wit and irreverence. I think he sometimes thought of himself as my caretaker. During one hard time in my life, Schafer came by to check on me. I opened the door, he took one look and said, "Damn...you look like shit...I'm gonna go get you some meat." He always kept a freezer full of beef, thanks to a deal he'd made to help a friend, many years ago. Now he was passing the fruits of his kindness on to me.



He was always working on my truck and there were many times when he wouldn't take my money. So I started buying him Scotch. Gene loved single malt Scotch, especially Glenlivet, so whenever I stopped by the liquor store, Fritz would reach for the good stuff. I'd swing by the shop and show him the paper bag; if he had company (and he almost always did), he'd whisper, "Bring it over to the house later... I don't want to share my Scotch with these guys. Hell, they wouldn't know good liquor if it bit 'em on the ass." Gene was as generous a man as I ever met, but NOT with his ardent spirits!

More than anything, Gene was generous with his time. If he thought you needed his help, he was there. And he was like that because he never knew of any other way to be. He didn't want praise or excessive gratitude for his assistance, because it never occurred to him he was doing anything extraordinary.

The danger in singing Gene's praises, however, is the risk of suggesting he was some kind of a benevolent and saintly do-gooder. Imagine using the word 'saintly' and 'Gene Schafer' in the same sentence! We all know better than that. Gene was as outrageous and outspoken as anyone I ever met. For you who never had the pleasure of Gene's company, here's how it was....we all know how most of us have that little gate in our brains that keeps us from saying the things we think and would like to say, but choose not to. That block between the mind and the

mouth. Gene never closed that gate, or maybe he didn't have a gate. All I know for sure is that, whatever Gene had on his mind, he told us...all of it.

One morning, an emergency erupted in my bathroom, and as always I sought Gene's help. I'd been taking a shower, when suddenly I heard the

I thought he'd live to a hundred. Though he only made it to eighty, you'd have to say he got to be Gene, right to the end.

most godawful noise. It sounded like a water line had burst somewhere under the house. I shut off the shower and the noise continued. I was sure the main line had ruptured. With soap in my hair, I dressed quickly and raced to the shop. Gene was there, of course, and with tools in hand, he jumped in his truck 'Windy,' and followed me back. He shut off the main line at the meter, walked inside and we could still hear the noise. Puzzled, Gene leaned into the shower, paused, and then looked over his shoulder at me and said, "I won't tell nobody."

He reached into the metal accessories rack that hung from the shower head and produced....my electric toothbrush. Still running...

"You want me to turn this damn thing off, or do you wanna do it?"

And despite his pledge to keep this little incident between the two of us, within hours, strangers on the street were stopping to ask if I'd found the 'off' button on my toothbrush yet. Gene couldn't pass up a good story.

I think Gene loved every day of his life and his family and his friends and all the people he encountered each day. He saw the humor in just about anything. And he loved Monticello. Years ago, when I used to make my annual pilgrimage to Australia, he'd admonish me to give up my travels and stay home. "What the hell you going to the other side of the planet for?" he'd complain. "Everything I need is right here. If it ain't here, it ain't anywhere."

If he thought you needed his help, he was there. And he was like that because he never knew of any other way to be.



I'd like to think Gene is rattling about, somewhere nearby, making un-Earthly wisecracks at his non-drinking Mormon friends, or stoking a Heaven-sent woodstove with a hundred feet of old garden hose, or maybe waiting for me to do something stupid (again). But one thing's certain, wherever he is and whatever he's doing, I'd bet Gene Schafer is having a good time.