

## Do Grey Currawongs Eat Carrion?

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**Summary.** Fourteen days of observations of carrion feeding from a dead Common Brushtail Possum *Trichosurus vulpecula* carcass are reported. The Grey Currawong *Strepera versicolor*, Australian Magpie *Gymnorhina tibicen* and Australian Raven *Corvus coronoides* were present on each of the 14 days, yet only the Australian Raven was observed to feed from the carcass.

Debus (in Strahan 1996) stated that cracticids (unspecified) eat fresh carrion. However, to my knowledge there are no records of the Grey Currawong *Strepera versicolor* taking carrion.

For 14 days in February 2005 the Grey Currawong, Australian Magpie *Gymnorhina tibicen* and Australian Raven *Corvus coronoides* were observed in close proximity to the carcass of a Common Brushtail Possum *Trichosurus vulpecula*. They were observed continuously for all daylight hours from a window of a cottage, which acted as a hide. The carcass was situated in a fenced garden at Dryandra Woodland Village, in south-western Australia (32°48'S, 117°0'E). Dryandra Woodland is composed of a series of large woodland fragments, which are separated by agricultural land; the total area of Dryandra Woodland is approximately 27 000 ha (DCLM 1995).

The possum was discovered dead, from unknown causes, in the garden on the first morning of observations. It had died in the six hours before its discovery. Currawongs, Magpies and Ravens were present each day, morning and afternoon, within 20 m of the carcass. The greatest numbers of each species present simultaneously each morning and afternoon were averaged over the 14 days, to obtain daily activity indices, which were: Currawongs  $3.0 \pm$  standard error  $0.10$ , Magpies  $5.5 \pm 0.23$ , and Ravens  $1.9 \pm 0.07$ .

Ravens fed from the carcass on six days, from the second day until the seventh day for a total of 13 hours (mean 2.2 h/day), ranging from 1.0 to 6.5 h/day; they fed six times in the morning and four times in the afternoon. The carcass was checked on the tenth day and found to have dried out, with no substantial meat remaining. The Ravens fed vigorously from the carcass, moving it 2.0 and 4.0 m, respectively, on two occasions while the other species were nearby. There was no aggression or competition observed between the three species. All three species drank from the same watering points in the garden, and both the Ravens and the Currawongs ate heartily from the same Oranges *Citrus sinensis* that were on the ground nearby. All three species were present in the garden simultaneously and at different times each day.

Corvids are well known as carrion feeders (e.g. Heinrich 1989; Barker & Vestjens 1991). Johnstone & Storr (2004) and Higgins *et al.* (2006) gave details of Magpies eating carrion including Purple Swamphen *Porphyrio porphyrio*, Rabbit *Oryctolagus cuniculus*, Brown Hare *Lepus capensis* and Sheep *Ovis aries*. There were no records in these references that reported the Grey Currawong eating carrion.

The Grey Currawong and Australian Magpie did not eat carrion during the observations at Dryandra. They could see that Australian Ravens fed from the carcass, but this did not lead them to feed from it. Grey Currawongs are common residents in the garden except in the breeding season (pers. obs.) and were probably aware of the time of death of the possum, although not the cause of death. The lack of interest in the carcass by Currawongs and Magpies indicates that they either rarely or, in the case of the Grey Currawong, may never eat carrion. The same three species have been monitored over two years in a roadside survey in south-western Australia. In that study, corvids and raptors have been detected at carrion, but the Grey Currawong and Australian Magpie have not (Fulton *et al.* in prep.).

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