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## **On the Field Characters of Little and Torresian Crows in Central Western Australia.**

By PETER J. CURRY, 29 Canning Mills Road  
Kelmescott, W.A., 6111.

The Little Crow *Corvus bennetti* and the Torresian Crow *C. orru* are evidently sympatric over a large part of northern and central Australia and are notoriously difficult to separate in the field. Over their respective ranges, morphological similarities and individual variation in size are such that some individuals are extremely difficult to identify even in the hand (Rowley, 1970). Despite various recent references which draw attention to the importance of call-notes and habits in field identification (Rowley, 1973; Readers' Digest, 1976), published information on the subject has generally been very brief.

The notes which follow result from field observations made in the Wiluna region of central Western Australia, during eighteen months of almost daily contact with both species. My interest in crow identification developed as I gradually became familiar with their respective vocabularies and habits, then intensified as I became aware that a tentative identification of single birds in flight was often possible before any confirmatory calls were heard. I have no idea whether any of the ideas given here will apply with success to non-breeding populations of crows in other areas.

*Field characters of non-breeding crows.* —

## 1. HABITS

## Little Crow:

The gregarious habits of this species are apparent at all times of the year. This is the common crow of the environs of human activities, loose flocks habitually foraging around township streets, gardens, camps, rubbish tips and windmills. Away from humans, *bennetti* tends to occur in flocks of 5-100 or more, often around *Acacia* thickets on stony plains. Spectacular high flights and mass aerobatics are commonly seen at all seasons, and take place particularly from mid-morning to early afternoon. I have never once even suspected the presence of *orru* amongst the aerial assemblages, which are regarded by Rowley (1973) as a form of social synchronisation.

Little Crows call frequently, both in flight and when perched. When the usual calls are given from a perch, the body is almost horizontal, the wings are elevated as the tail is depressed. In flight, most calls are given without interrupting the regular wingbeats, which are generally faster than *orru*'s though perhaps only as a function of body size. As noted by Goodwin (1976: 110), single birds flying to join others sometimes perform a short, direct flight of reduced-amplitude wingbeats before reaching the perch, in a manner to (but less exaggerated than) the common reduced-amplitude flight of the Australian Raven *C. coronoides*. When landing, Little Crows rarely rearrange their folded wingtips with more than one clear movement.

## Torresian Crow:

This species is typically a more solitary crow of wooded habitats, particularly the Red Gum *E. camaldulensis* creeks and mallee sandplains. Although concentrations do occur around temporary local abundances of food, for example grain sowings, groups of five or more seem rare, one to three birds being the more usual social unit. Around Wiluna, Torresian Crows do occur about the settlements, though when present they more often remain perched in gums and less often forage on the ground in close proximity to human activity.

They are rarely seen flying very high and do not habitually circle and soar on thermals as does *bennetti*. Like the Little Crow, *orru* habitually calls both when perched and in flight. One useful feature seems to be a tendency for birds in flight, particularly two together, to close the wings and 'miss a beat' when calling, though to the observer sound-travel time often makes the call seem to follow the dips in flight action. This feature of flight should not be confused with the wing-flip action of the Little Raven *C. mellori*; it is not evident in non-breeding assemblages of *bennetti*, though I have seen it exhibited by lone pairs of Little Crows breeding in the Pilbara district of W.A.

As emphasized by (Rowley 1970), the exaggerated shuffling of the wings on alighting is a good character to look for. Around Wiluna, wing shuffling is given immediately after perching, more often than not.

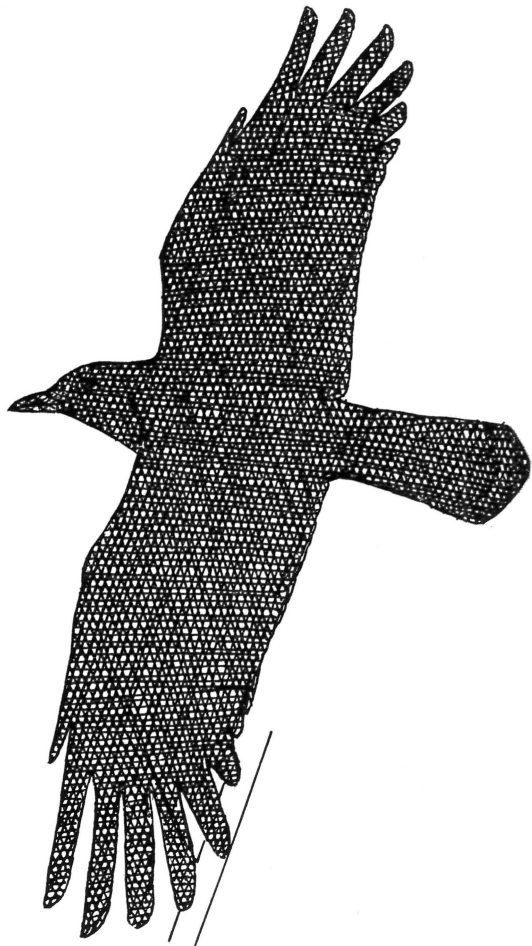
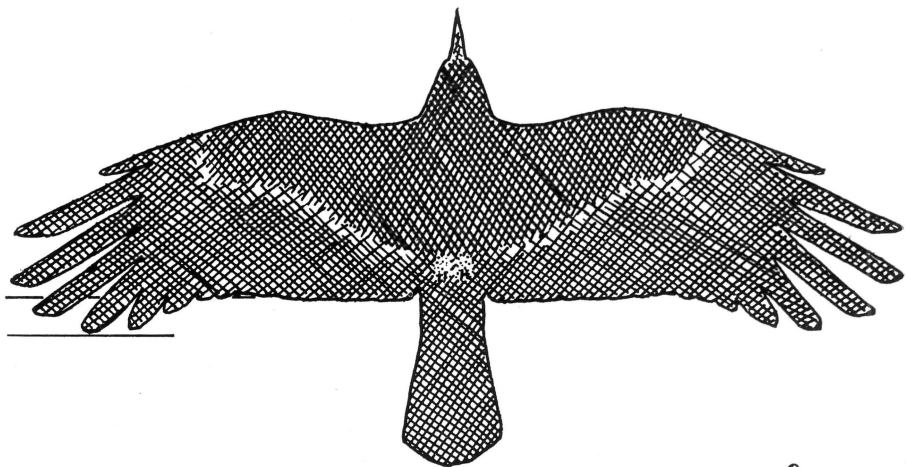


Fig. 1: Crows in flight.

Torresian Crow  
(dorsal aspect,  
above);

Little Crow  
(ventral aspect,  
below).



## 2. VOICE

## Little Crow:

Commonest calls are harsh, unmusical, nasal and almost monotonous in any one series of calls. Of 119 sequential calls noted on two dates in May 1978, 94 (79%) were of one or two notes only. The other 25 calls were strings of 4-15 notes. The best renderings of the common calls seem to be 'nark' and 'nark-nark', though I often find Goodwin's (1976: 110) rendering of calls in South Australia 'kah! kah!' to ring truer, particularly at close range.

Other possible renderings for the common calls are: 'garr-garr', 'prark-prarrk' and 'ark-ark-ark-ark' etc.

Other calls: perched, inactive birds often give a long, low call which resembles the opening of a great rusty door. A single 'crock' is commonly heard from the birds heading off in flight.

## Torresian Crow:

Commonest calls are more musical than those of *bennetti*, having a laughing or barking quality. Call sequences tend to start with short notes, but often end with one to three lower, slower and more mellow notes. Unlike *bennetti*, calls are usually 3-8 notes long. To my ear, the description given in Readers' Digest (1976) of 'never an "a" sound' is misleading, at least for *orru* in this area. Examples of full call renderings which I would offer are: 'ak-ak-ak-oak-oak . . . oak' and 'ok-ok-ok-ok; owe-owe' with the last note longer than the others. Sometimes birds will put great emphasis on the last note and draw it out in a way recalling the last 'dying' syllable of the call of the Australian Raven. When such a call is given, individuals adopt an exaggerated calling posture with neck extended and the bill uplifted.

Other notes include a very uncorvid-like high pitched 'laugh' of accelerating spluttering notes, for me recalling only a common conversational phrase of the Herring Gull *Larus argentatus*. This call is given both when perched and in flight. It has an upward inflection as the notes accelerate, before tailing off at the end. An ineffective rendering would be: 'a-a-e-e-e-i-i-eyu'. On a very few occasions, I have heard crows which I suspected were *bennetti* to give such a call, but this high pitched laughing phrase is certainly typical of *orru* alone in central W.A. The frequency of this vocalisation may prove to have a seasonal bias, since I have heard it regularly during the cooler months only. Both non-breeding individuals and breeding pairs utter this 'laughing' call.

There is a common monosyllabic flight call: 'pruk', similar to, but deeper than the corresponding flight note of *bennetti*. Another common flight call is 'oh-owoh'.

## 3. MORPHOLOGY and FLIGHT PATTERN

I can offer nothing to suggest that individuals of either species can be identified when perched, even in the best of viewing conditions. Whilst the physical dimensions of *orru* and *bennetti* are known to overlap in some individuals, *orru* in flight very often appears as a decidedly larger crow than at least most *bennetti*, if both are present for more or less direct comparison. When free of

any major features of moult, airborne *bennetti* looks compact and blunt-winged, with a more agile flight than *orru*, which can appear contrastingly long-winged and long-tailed as it flies with slower, laboured wingbeats. When circling and gliding overhead, *bennetti* tends to hold its carpals at an angle which makes the tips of the innermost 'fingered' primaries extend well behind the nearly straight line of the tips of the secondaries. On the other hand, *orru* in flight usually shows a more attenuated wing-tip, with the 'fingers' extending only marginally behind the line of secondaries (see sketches). Also in flight, *orru* frequently appears longer-necked, I suspect showing relatively more head projection in front of the wings, than does the more sunken-headed *bennetti*.

Both *bennetti* (often) and *orru* (less often) show an irregular narrow whitish band around the bases of the flight feathers. This is a very variable character which is accentuated by moult and strong overhead light. Both species can show very pale soles of the feet when flying overhead, the actual colouration presumably being affected by the ground on which the bird has been walking.

#### DISCUSSION

I agree with the previous authors that the respective voices of Little Crows and Torresian Crows are quite distinctive and, once known, seem the best field characters in identification. Both species' vocabularies are more varied than the popular reference books indicate. Though the commonest calls given by both crows are diagnostic, indeterminate notes are often uttered on their own or amid a series of more typical calls and will confuse the issue.

Several other features are also of some help in the confirmation of identification based on call-notes. For the Little Crow, more gregarious tendencies, aerial 'flock-drilling', reduced-amplitude flight to a perch and lack of wing shuffling on alighting are useful behavioural features. For the Torresian Crow, a lack of aerial social behaviour, partial wing closure when calling in flight and more than two movements of the folded wing-tips on alighting may be useful points. I also suspect that, for at least average-sized individuals, the two species do not have identical 'jizz' once airborne. I hope that other observers will stop to examine crows in the field (rather than giving them up as unidentifiable), and criticise the ideas given here in the light of their regional knowledge, thus bringing to light new criteria which aid or refute the practicalities of field identification.

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