

The Crow.

A PROPHYLACTIC BIRD.

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OF the work performed for man in Australia by birds none is more noticeable, though unfortunately but little recognized by us, than that accomplished by our crows or ravens. Their attainments were first recorded in the Old Testament, in which the raven is the first individual bird mentioned.

Noah's honoured though too voracious messenger did not re-enter its former home, though perchance it returned to perch on the roof of the ark. Later on, the raven was entrusted with the high honour of feeding Elijah the Prophet.

According to the early Christian poet, Sedulius, this dark-robed bird expiated those sins on land that it had perpetuated in the flood, and thus entirely rehabilitated itself.

Most persons have been unfortunately, though innocently, taught through the medium of verse, prose and pictures to regard the crow as something ill-omened or repulsive, owing to its penchant for carrion, and its occasional weakness, when tempted by the opportunity presented to it, to commit an assault on the eye of some prostrate ewe or lamb, probably believing them to be moribund, or to steal the eggs of birds and reptiles. Certain it is that it does some damage, but not of such a widespread nature as to have merited such odium. More assured it still is that it does a vast amount of good, and that its virtues far outweigh its vices. In fact its character is not so black as its livery.

Like the vultures of the tropics, which sweep out and purify the towns before the inhabitants rise, and before the powerful sun's rays stimulate the masses of garbage, thrown out without due regard to sanitary requirements, into a festering mass of putrefaction and disease-giving germs, so the crows and ravens, with wonderful regularity, day by day, traverse our vast Commonwealth and dispose of incalculable quantities of material that would otherwise form a potential source from which a never-ending stream of toxic bacteria would flow to prey upon both human and other animals, and which would bring misery and death in its wake. Their good works for us as preventers of pestilence can therefore be likened to the efforts of those scientists engaged in the laboratory preparing vaccines or anti-toxic sera to combat and prevent the devastating effects of scourges like plague, smallpox, anthrax and rinderpest, with a view to alleviate the sufferings of humanity generally.

Just watch the crows and ravens flocking to the banquet on the loathsome carcasses of our sheep and cattle strewn around on every hand, which have expired during a drought, through want of grass, or which have been stricken down by red-water fever, due to the tick pest or other causes.

Without compunction, and with decency and propriety, observe the corpses vanish.

In a moment a frightful mass of putrescence which man has shunned has re-entered the pure and wholesome current of universal life, and thus their action has been truly prophylactic. Do they possess any special adaptation which makes them immune to virulent germs? Have any researches been made in this direction?

Little do we realise that the removal of decaying animal matter by crows prevents the undue increase of the blowfly—a pest which is a carrier of disease to our homes, and the loss of money also to our pastoralists through the damage to the wool of their sheep when “blown” by flies. Licensed by nature these birds act as scavengers principally in the country districts.

Reliability is their motto; they never go on strike, and all they desire is to be left without interference to do their self-imposed task for us.

What would countries like India and Egypt have done if they had not had such birds as the adjutant, vulture and crow to cleanse their cities of offal.

Do we fully comprehend why these birds have been placed on this universe with us, and why it is passing strange that the more useful they are to us the more odious they appear to seem? They purify as if with fire, turning the corrupt into the incorrupt on land, just as certain gulls do on the sea and shore.

In America, the crow and the raven are, strange to say, recognized by some as an aid to the fisheries. At certain times of the year, there, as here, they repair to the beaches on the coast and devour starfish, the known enemies of the oyster and whelk beds. These creatures get astride the shellfish and devour the succulent contents of the shellfish's body.

Failing putrid carcasses, crows and ravens feast upon myriads of noxious insects, grubs, and caterpillars. The crow is one of the few birds that attacks caterpillars. Doubtless these creatures, which demolish enormous quantities of grass, or otherwise spoil our pastures through fouling them, have a nauseating flavour or are otherwise repellent. When they get the chance they account for small rodents, such as field mice, and immature snakes are also readily taken.

In ancient times the crow was a sacred bird, even now in Egypt and India it is revered by the natives, despite the fact, stated by Surgeon-General C. Ryan, of our Commonwealth forces, that he has seen it steal their milk by milking their cows surreptitiously. This is accomplished by the crow whilst the cow stands feeding amongst the herbage jumping up under the cow's udder and seizing a teat with its bill; by hanging on and then dropping downwards it causes a drop or two of milk to be expressed into its throat. This act is repeated until the crow is satisfied.

Old shibboleths remain and are still perpetuated, and even now we may see pictures of recent production portraying a witch with a black raven in association to further aid the expression of something

ill-omened or uncanny. This is at least unfair to our feathered friend, although perchance it acted the part of sexton in olden times when it picked the meat from the bones of the corpse hanging from the gibbet. The diet of a crow is as varied as its appetite is constant, and vegetable delicacies in the shape of different varieties of fruit, both cultivated and wild, and even green peas, have been known to be devoured by it on occasions. Its carrion eating habit, alas, has been the crow's undoing, and whilst it takes a toll of young rabbits captured by it alive, yet whilst fulfilling its part of purification in nature by demolishing dead animals, it falls a victim to poisoned rabbits through feasting upon their stricken bodies, although it is credited with the knowledge gained by experience that a dead rabbit is dangerous.

They are very sagacious, and have been known, when they have obtained an overplus of food, in the shape of hen eggs stolen from a farm yard where the fowls are allowed to lay their eggs promiscuously, to bury the surplus under the soil.

Scientists are divided in their opinion as to whether the Australian crow and raven are separate species of birds or are synonymous. To most persons they are known as crows. Some maintain that there is no line of demarcation between them; others separate those that have white bases to the feathers on the nape of the neck from those that are dark or slatey coloured. Others again classify the birds with white eyes as crows, others again judge them by the colour of the interior of their throats, their size, or the timbre of their voice, or shape of bill. The raven, some maintain, calls caw, caw, caw, whilst the crow, in a higher key and with lighter tone, says car, car, car-r-r.

As a pet the bird is both cleanly and amusing, and even amazingly intelligent. The late Mr. A. W. Milligan, who kept white-eyed crows in confinement stated that as a pet bird he regarded it as the most interesting and entertaining of all. It possesses a keen intelligence, and is easily domesticated and affectionate. It is a veritable "nigger minstrel" of bird life, with its shining black dress, its droll attitude, unlimited "patter" and the facility with which it showed the whites of its eyes.

Do Birds Rear a Second Brood in a Season?

By J. NEIL MCGILP, Adelaide.

I HAVE noticed that writers in the *Emu* often refer to a second brood for the season. I have always thought that many of our birds in a good season had a second nesting period and with a desire to get proof of it I have taken careful observations of certain pairs of birds for the past few seasons. So far as these observations go I am now quite satisfied that few of our birds rear a second family in a season, though, if the season is suitable they will lay a second, third, and even a fourth time if anything happens to destroy the other set or sets of eggs.
