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## The Fish Crow (*Corvus ossifragus*) Reaches Nebraska

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### INTRODUCTION

The Fish Crow (*Corvus ossifragus*) was formerly endemic to the southeastern United States where it inhabited coastal areas along the Atlantic and Gulf Coasts (McGowan 2001). Since the early 1900s, the species has steadily expanded north and west along major river systems (McGowan 2001). Fish Crow range expansion has followed a logical pattern, expanding along major rivers in regions close to established populations, in adjacent states to the south and east of Nebraska. The species was first recorded in Missouri in 1964 (Robbins and Easterla 1992). In 1984, Fish Crow was first reported in Kansas and by 1991 was found breeding in that state (Thomson and Ely 1992). Iowa's first record was in 1991 (Kent and Dinsmore 1996). There are no records from adjacent states to the north and west of Nebraska (Tallman et al. 2002, Andrews and Righter 1992, Scott 1993, Wyoming Game and Fish Department 1997).

The Fish Crow has long been considered an inevitable addition to Nebraska's avifauna. During the summer of 2009, we observed an adult Fish Crow on multiple occasions on the lower Platte River (LPR) near its confluence with the Missouri River. Documentation was provided to the Nebraska Ornithologists' Union Records Committee (NOURC) and this observation was subsequently accepted as the first documented record for the species in Nebraska (Mark Brogie, NOURC Chairperson, personal communication). Here, we describe our observations and comment on the future occurrence of the species in Nebraska.

#### FIELD ENCOUNTERS

A single Fish Crow was observed by Jorgensen and Panella on 29 May, Jorgensen and Stoner on 24 July, and Silcock and Keith Dyche on 8 August 2009. All encounters occurred on the LPR between U.S. Highway 75 and the Platte - Missouri River confluence in Sarpy and Cass Counties. The first two observations occurred while Nebraska Game and Parks Commission employees were conducting research on Interior Least Terns (*Sternula antillarum athalassos*) and Piping Plovers (*Charadrius melodus*). This portion of the LPR was accessed on all occasions by canoes or kayaks.

The initial observation occurred at 16:45 on 29 May. Jorgensen noted an unfamiliar bird call originating downstream. At that time, the bird was approximately 0.25 miles away and the call was faint. As Jorgensen and Panella moved downstream, the call continued to be heard. They searched for the call's source and within a minute or two of initially hearing the bird, located a crow (*Corvus sp.*) calling from a snag adjacent to a large sandbar within the river channel. They immediately discussed the possibility that the bird was a Fish Crow. They observed the crow from a distance of 40-50 meters for a total of 20 minutes, including approximately 10 minutes in which the bird called constantly from a dead tree limb. It was at this time that call differences between this crow and typical and juvenile American Crows were discussed. With the bird in sight, it was concluded that the bird was a Fish Crow. No other crows were observed in this area or in association with the Fish Crow.

On 24 July, Jorgensen and Stoner were observing Interior Least Terns and Piping Plovers on a midstream sandbar near the original observation location. Jorgensen again heard a call from a distance that sounded like the Fish Crow heard on 29 May. Jorgensen and Stoner walked south toward the call, which was approximately 400 meters away. As they approached the south bank, a juvenile Bald Eagle (*Haliaeetus leucocephalus*) was sitting in a large dead cottonwood tree (*Populus deltoides*). They located the calling Fish Crow in the interior of a live tree adjacent to the dead cottonwood and were able to watch and listen to the Fish Crow from approximately 40 meters. The Fish Crow appeared to be half-heartedly harassing the eagle. After a few minutes, the Fish Crow flew into the dead tree where the juvenile Bald Eagle was perched. It continued to hop around the eagle, calling constantly, for about 15 additional minutes and then finally flew out of sight into the vegetation. Once it flew off, it ceased calling. No other crows were observed in association with the Fish Crow.

Aware of earlier reports, Silcock and Keith Dyche canoed upstream from Schilling Wildlife Management Area to search for the Fish Crow on 8 August. The Fish Crow was relocated, first by call only, but subsequently it was observed chasing two American Crows (*Corvus brachyrhynchos*). The Fish Crow stopped chasing the American Crows and was observed perched for an additional 15 minutes before the bird flew off. No additional observations of the Fish Crow were made.

#### DESCRIPTION

The Fish Crow was entirely glossy black and appeared sleek and long-tailed compared to typical American Crows (*Corvus brachyrhynchos*). The bird was an adult and showed no signs of being a hatching-year bird. On 24 July, while the bird was observed in flight, it was noted that the mid-wing primaries (P4 or P5) on both wings were missing, thus indicating the bird was molting. This detail confirmed that the bird was an adult, as only after-hatching year birds lose and replace primaries during summer (McGowan 2001, 2002, Pyle 1997). It was also noted that the bird's throat appeared fluffed or shaggy when it called.

The typical call heard during all observations was an "ahn". However, several variations of the call were heard. All calls sounded nasal and croaky, and also somewhat thin, when compared to American Crow calls. Fish Crow's nasal and thin "ahn" call is distinctive from adult American Crow's comparatively deep and boisterous "caa caa caa" call. A newly-fledged or young juvenile American Crow giving a "begging" call could lead to misidentification as a Fish Crow. Although the tone of the juvenile American Crow's begging call is similar, its delivery is different in that it is extended or "dragged-out". Fish Crow's calls are comparatively concise and are not extended. The Platte River Fish Crow gave calls consistent with Fish Crow. The two-syllable call of the Fish Crow was not heard.

Young (hatching-year) American Crows were heard and seen on numerous occasions (most while canoeing or kayaking on the Platte River) during the summer of 2009. Calls were similar, but American Crow calls were separable from the calls given by the Fish Crow. On all occasions when young American Crows were heard and observed, the young birds were in family groups of 4-8 individuals. Hatching-year American Crow calls were also given in social situations. When birds were observed within a reasonable distance, hatching-year (juvenile) crows were easily distinguished from adults by a large swollen gape, duller plumage, and weaker flight. The Fish Crow observed on the Platte River in 2009 was usually solitary and not in association with other crows (i.e., not in social situations that would illicit a begging call). The exception to this was when it was observed chasing American Crows on 8 August.

#### DISCUSSION

American and Fish Crows are very similar morphologically and vocally. The bird observed on the LPR in 2009 was identified as a Fish Crow because it 1) was an adult, 2) was observed singly and not in association with other crows, 3) gave distinctive nasal and thin "ahn" calls, 4) possessed a distinctive "fluffed" or "shaggy"

throat when calling, 5) was in expected habitat in a logical location, and 6) multiple observers saw and heard the bird. Written documentation provided to NOURC was reviewed and these observations of Fish Crow are now the first accepted record for Nebraska.

The addition of Fish Crow to Nebraska's avifauna has been anticipated. As noted above, Fish Crow range expansion has occurred at a slow and steady rate for decades (McGowan 2001, Sauer et al. 2008). Since 2000, the number of reports and locations in which Fish Crows have been recorded in Kansas and Missouri has also slowly, but steadily, increased (Dinsmore 2005, 2006, 2008, Grzybowski and Silcock 2005, 2006, 2008). In 2003, Fish Crow was reported from the Kansas City area, Missouri (McNeill 2003), less than 160 km (100 miles) from Nebraska.

This first accepted record occurred at a location perhaps more northerly than expected. The 2009 record occurred approximately 145 km (90 miles) north of Nebraska's southern border. Range expansion by Fish Crow, however, has been described as following a leapfrog pattern, with individuals or groups forming colonies disjunct from established ranges (McGowan 2001). The Fish Crow was observed in expected habitat along a major river.

Based on long-term range expansion, Fish Crow records are likely to increase in Nebraska in the future. Additional records are most likely to occur along major rivers in the southeastern part of the state. Observers need to exercise caution when identifying possible Fish Crows. Awareness of subtle morphological and vocal differences between American and Fish Crow will be important. Future observations should be documented. It remains unclear whether the Fish Crow will become a regularly-occurring or breeding species in Nebraska. Such an outcome seems plausible, if not likely, at this time.

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