

SUBTERRANEAN NEST SITE USED BY COMMON RAVENS IN MINEVILLE, ESSEX COUNTY

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ABSTRACT — Common Ravens (*Corvus corax*) were nesting in an open pit iron ore mine in Mineville, NY. On 30 May 1996, 3 unfledged young were seen foraging near the rim of the pit, after walking up its slope. This is 48 days after the late date (12 April) previously reported for NY.

INTRODUCTION

In the early 1970s Republic Steel Company abandoned its iron ore mining operations in Mineville, Essex County, NY. This put an end to about 150 continuous years of iron ore mining at this site.

Over that long span of time the landscape has been altered in many ways. There are mountains of mine tailings that have been piled up and are waiting to be processed again for their rare earths. Alongside are cavernous mine pits from which the tailings have been extracted. On some days plumes of thick mist rise out of deep plunge holes in the earth where chilly subsurface air collides with warmer surface air. This strange phenomenon reminds us that below Mineville lies an intricate gallery of shafts and tunnels.

This landscape offers a unique type of habitat for some species of animals. These abandoned mines are ideal habitat for hibernating bats, including the rare Indiana Bat (*Myotis sodalis*). The largest open pit is known as 21 Mine and it is the site of nesting Common Ravens (*Corvus corax*). Peterson (1988)

in *The Atlas of Breeding Birds in New York State*, says that, "all nests except those on a mine structure and an open pit mine (at Tahawus) in Essex County have been on rock cliffs." The nesting site at 21 Mine, I believe, is not much different from other cliff sites, except that it is situated below ground, rather than above ground.

The circumference of 21 Mine is about two-tenths of a mile around and it is 300 feet deep. A series of barbed wire fences surround the open pit and prevent anyone from getting too close. A pioneer growth of aspens, Pin Cherry, and Gray Birch now grow along the rim of the open pit and hide it from view. I have not dared to jump the fence and peer over the edge to view the interior of the pit. However, I have been shown old pictures of 21 Mine. It is a rugged looking place with many ledges and recesses where ravens might nest. The east, west, and north faces are nearly vertical drops and the south face has a more gradual 60 degree slope.

Mining first began here in 1824 and by 1955 it was abandoned. At one time a one and one-half inch steel wire cable was strung across the cavern and a trolley maneuvered miners out over the center where they were lowered by bucket to the floor to chisel and dynamite for iron ore (Jack Brennan, personal communication). It is said that Pauline White, a silent screen star of the 1920s, filmed a daring tightrope scene in the movie *Perils of Pauline* over this same open pit (Lorreta Reynolds and Joan Daby, personal communication). So, this site has a very interesting human history as well as natural history.

OBSERVATIONS

I first became aware of the ravens at this site in mid May of 1996. I heard them for weeks as their voices echoed out of this mine pit and I watched them swirl over and into the pit. At first I made nothing of this rather unusual behavior. On 29 May I observed the ravens at closer range from just outside the outer fence. On 30 May I watched three unfledged young forage and pick near the rim of the open pit. They had managed to walk up the more gradual south slope of the pit and shortly thereafter they left their nesting pit for the first time. Adult ravens would periodically fly to the rim to monitor the young birds. At a distance I could see that the feathers on the young birds had not completely come in, particularly around their beaks. The thirtieth of May is more than a full month later than the late date (12 Apr) given for unfledged young in the *Atlas* (Meade 1988).

Wade Haskins, a former mine worker and long time Mineville resident, told me (personal communication) that this was not the first year ravens had nested at this site. He thought that perhaps they had returned to this same site for at least six years. The *Atlas* map indicates that ravens were not reported here during the period 1980-86.

Later in the season it became obvious that 21 Mine open pit was continuing to be used by the ravens for night time roosting and day time resting. They seem to know instinctively that this is a safe haven.

LITERATURE CITED

- Peterson JMC. 1988. Common Raven *Corvus corax*. In: Andrle RF, Carroll JR, editors. *The Atlas of Breeding Birds in New York State*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press. p 286-287.
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