

A HAWKING RAVEN (*CORVUS CORAX*)

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1- hawk, v.t. And v.i.; 2-hawked, pt., pp., hawking, ppr.

- 1.- Hawk -To catch or attempt to catch (birds) by means of hawks trained for the purpose ; to practice falconry
- 2.- Hawked- To fly at; to attack on the wing, as the hawk does.

29 May, 03: Place- Atlas Block 2469A (Allen Lake) heading East on the Vincent Hill Road:

Pulling my truck over to the south shoulder of the road, I stopped and got out. I had spotted the incoming bird about two hundred and fifty yards out. It was headed west, nearly parallel to the road. If the big bird maintained its course, it would pass directly in front of me about 100 yards north of my position. I estimated its altitude to be about forty feet over the tree tops, in the neighborhood of one hundred feet off the ground. If nothing changed, I was in the ideal position to view the bird as it passed in front of me.

Locking my 8x32 SE binoculars on the bird confirmed that it was a Common Raven (*Corvus corax*). The wing beats were steady and deliberate; its course a straight line, and it was silent. My impression was that this was a bird focused on a task. The raven steadily reduced the distance between us, and I was content to merely observe and admire both the individual and the species.

As I watched, a Tree Swallow appeared in my field of view, approaching from the north at a slightly lower altitude. The little bird was moving fast in a shallow arc which would momentarily put both birds, at different altitudes, but nearly directly in front of me at almost the same instant. My interest was in the raven, and I gave almost no thought to the swallow.

Without warning, the raven lowered its head and partially folded its wings. The big bird dropped ten feet head first, in a fraction of a second. Pulling up past level from the dive, the raven banked slightly to the right; lowered and flared its tail while spreading its wings to their full extent, all in a single fluid motion. The action reminded me of a spring loaded umbrella popping open.

With body, flared wings, and fully fanned tail now nearly vertical to the ground, the raven came to a full stall in mid-air, hanging like a solid black wall directly in the path of the approaching swallow.

Instinctively the smaller bird tried to pull up and bank west to avoid running head first into the chest of the raven; and in the process also came to a full mid-air stall inches in front of the raven. That stall proved to be fatal.

With open beak, the raven extended its neck, slipped its beak behind the head of the swallow and clamped down. I suspect the swallow died almost instantly from a broken neck.

The raven dropped several feet before its wings could displace enough air for the bird to level out and continue its westward journey. From the right side of the big bird's beak hung the limp body of the Tree Swallow.

The raven was no longer silent. As is often the case with this species, the bird softly 'awked' and croaked as it flew off.

I have reviewed this incident in my mind a number of times. It is my belief that when I first spotted the Common Raven it was intent on getting to its west bound destination only. The Tree Swallow unwittingly created an unplanned opportunity for the raven to hawk and it instinctively capitalized on the moment.

While the sudden unexpected mid-air hawking maneuver caught me by surprise, the split second timing and control demonstrated by the bird did not. Ravens are well-documented aerial acrobats; and I have personally witnessed mid-air back flips and barrel rolls by pairs of ravens dropping like stones in seemingly suicidal free fall courtship displays. What always impresses me about these aerial displays (including this just described "hawking" incident) is the control and split second timing needed to execute such maneuvers without injury or possibly even death for the raven itself. This species is second to none when it comes to aerodynamic agility.

One final thought. I don't know why many individuals of this species appear to be having mid-air 'muttered' conversations with themselves, but then like many humans that talk to themselves, perhaps it is some form of self therapy.

