

A COMMON RAVEN (*Corvus corax*) NEST IN KEW GARDENS, QUEENS COUNTY, LONG ISLAND

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A Common Raven (*Corvus corax*) nest discovered in the Kew Gardens section of Queens County is the first historical nesting record of this species for Long Island and New York City (*Kingbird* Region 10).

At a New York City Butterfly Club meeting attended by Corey Finger on 8 March 2010, several members were discussing a recent spate of Common Ravens in Queens County, including a bird heard and seen in the vicinity of the Forest Park waterhole in May 2009. When Johnny Lawrenson, a naturalist from Kew Gardens, reported that Common Ravens had a nest on a water tower near his house, and had nested the previous year and fledged two young (Lawrenson, pers. comm.), his report was met with a healthy dose of skepticism. Nonetheless, Corey checked it out the following day, 9 March, and was amazed to find not only the ravens that Johnny had said were there, but also their nest!

NEST LOCATION AND DESCRIPTION

The nest was in an urban landscape in central Queens County. It was situated on a crossbar of a large steel-lattice-supported New York City water tower. The nest was approximately 60 feet above the ground and 30 feet below the water tank. The nest was placed at the junction of the crossbar and one of the legs of the tower, in a spot that provided shelter from northerly winds and mid-day sun. Several coniferous and deciduous trees located on the site of the water tower and adjacent properties provided some additional seclusion. The adult ravens sometimes roosted in the trees. The site is approximately 1/8 acre and is surrounded by a cyclone fence, restricting access to the tower and pump house. The nest base was constructed of large sticks and was bowl-shaped and approximately two feet in diameter and one foot tall.

SUMMARY OF NEST OBSERVATIONS

The nest was viewed exclusively from adjacent streets using binoculars and spotting scopes. Photographs were obtained by digiscoping.

Corey Finger first observed two adult ravens at the nest on 9 March, 2010. Subsequent observations were made by both Corey Finger and Seth Ausubel throughout the nesting period into early June. Observations were made at least weekly, but usually more frequently, for periods of 10 minutes to 1.5 hours.

From 10 March to 24 April, adult birds were observed brooding, and changing places on the nest. During this period, a warm day on 11 April was the only occasion that the nest was observed to have been left unoccupied for a significant period of time—approximately 10 minutes. On 10 March, one adult replaced the other on the nest and spent about thirty seconds manipulating something (out of view) in the nest. On 14 March, one adult brought a stick of appropriate size for nest building, and deposited it in the nest. On 5 April, while one adult was on the nest, the other adult arrived and was observed regurgitating into the nest, not to the other adult. However, nestlings were not seen at this time. On 10 April a food exchange was observed between the two adults at the nest. On 24 April, as the adults switched places on the nest, the incoming adult was observed regurgitating food to a nestling.

On 1 May and 2 May two nestlings were clearly visible, gaping and being fed by the adults. The heads of the nestlings were pink and their eyes were still closed. Photos were obtained. On 8 May, it was clear that three nestlings were present. One nestling appeared smaller than the other two. On 16, 17, 21 and 22 May three nestlings were observed, and photos obtained. During this period, the nestlings were covered with black feathers and were frequently observed exercising their wings and vocalizing. The nestlings all appeared similar in size. Parental visits were less frequently observed.

On 30 May, the young birds were much larger and were standing in the nest, appearing ready to fledge. In one hour of observation, the parents were not seen. On 31 May, the young birds had fledged. They were observed walking on the crossbar, returning to and again leaving the nest. They called raucously at the approach of an adult bird. Photos were obtained. On 6 June, two fledglings were observed on the tower, away from and below the level of the nest. They were vigorously exercising their wings in strong breezes. One adult bird was also present. All three were vocalizing persistently, and the adult was flying about the tower. It briefly fed one of the begging young. On 7 June, following the passage of a cold front, the birds were not seen or heard in about 30 minutes of observation. On 8 June two young and one adult were again seen on the tower. The adult was flying about and perching nearby with a food morsel, appearing to coax the juvenile birds off the tower (Loscalzo, pers. comm.). On 9, 13, and 15 June one juvenile was seen flying around and perching on nearby roofs and in trees. Observations on other days during this period near the nest and in the surrounding area did not result in any raven sightings. But one juvenile raven was seen and heard on 26 June in Forest Hills, about 1.5 miles from the nest site (Mirth, pers. comm.).

DISCUSSION

Observations of the Kew Gardens raven nest indicate patterns and periods of brooding, parental care, and fledging consistent with documented norms (e.g., Boarman, *et al.* 1999, and McGowan and Corwin, 2008). Two, if not three, young successfully fledged in 2010.

In New York State, by the early 20th century, ravens were extirpated from all areas except the Adirondacks, due principally to human persecution and deforestation. Populations have increased greatly since then, and especially since the 1970s. As of the period of the Second Breeding Bird Atlas (2000-2005; McGowan and Corwin, 2008), breeding was confirmed in all Regions of the state except the western Great Lakes Plains and the Coastal Lowlands, including all of *Kingbird* Region 10. The increases in New York State parallel increases in Common Raven populations throughout the United States.

The ability of Common Ravens to use a variety of substrates for nesting, including man-made structures (see Boarman, *et al.*, 1999), and their increasing tolerance of humans following centuries of persecution, are undoubtedly key factors in the establishment of urban populations. The Kew Gardens nest is no exception. While some complaints from neighborhood residents occurred late in the nesting season due to the large, plaintive young birds, in combination with open windows, the authors found the residents to be curious and generally positive about the ravens. The ravens, in turn, were seen feeding various edible urban detritus (e.g., French fries, bread) to the nestlings, and foraging in gutters of surrounding homes. They were even reported taking hard-boiled eggs provided by residents.

Common Ravens will likely be a permanent and increasing part of our urban avifauna. While the Kew Gardens nest is the first documented in *Kingbird* Region 10, the event was anticipated (e.g., see KB 59: 296). Following pioneering visits near the Queens-Northern Nassau County line in 2006, documented by Peter Martin (KB 57: 15-16), ravens have been reported regularly from northern Nassau Co., Staten Island, and the Bronx since winter 2008-2009. The first report from Queens recorded in *The Kingbird* was July 2009, after the birds had nested. It would not be surprising if there were already other established nests in the Region. In fact, observations by Peter Martin around the Frick Estate in Roslyn, Nassau County, indicate the possible presence of a juvenile bird in early June 2010, and six ravens there on 22 June (Martin, pers. comm.). The distance between this regular Roslyn location and the Kew Gardens nest is 12 miles. The Roslyn birds disappeared during the nesting period in Kew Gardens, and were seen again around the time the Kew Gardens young fledged, so the possibility that they are all the same family group from two years of breeding in Kew Gardens cannot be ruled out.

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Common Raven nest site, Kew Gardens, Queens County, 31 May 2010, © C. Finger.