

## COLUMNISTS

# Can you name that raven?

**Marianne Marugg** Special to the Reporter-News

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Having been fascinated since childhood with the idea of ravens, I have been thrilled to be able to watch their audacious behavior in places such as Yellowstone, Washington State and New Mexico.

I never expected to see one in my own neighborhood; however, I have been seeing one large raven around our farm. He often sits on a utility pole near one of the two highways in the area or flies rapidly over the fields.

I suspect that the two highways provide a steady supply of carrion for the raven, and being a day hunter he has only the hawks as competition. It is so exciting to hear his deep voice with its “quork” call from overhead.

He appears to be a Common Raven, the largest of the American corvids, at about 24 inches in height and weighing about 2 pounds as an adult. Common Ravens are completely black with shaggy feathers around their throats. A diamond-shaped tail and a wingspan of about 46 inches in flight help identify them as well.

Ravens will eat just about anything they can find, including fish, frogs, insects, seeds, fruits, small birds and eggs, human garbage and dog food. They are notorious for caching food and being able to retrieve it.

Ravens are thought to be some of the most intelligent of animals. They are able to plan ahead, to recognize a human face — after several months of training — and to solve complex puzzles. They can even delay gratification in order to obtain a better piece of food at a later time. Their cleverness and skills have resulted in their being known as tricksters, clever and helpful friends to people, aides to hunters in finding animals and the subject of legends.

They are seen frequently eating carrion left from the kill by a pack of wolves but also snatching pieces of meat as the wolves are eating. It is thought that they may help the wolf

pack by calling attention to sick or injured animals, which are easier for the pack to take down.

Ravens, even though they have very large and heavy bills, cannot open the body of a large animal to access the meat, so they benefit from the canine tearing ability of the wolves.

Ravens are found around the world in virtually every type of environment, often in rugged country. They tend to be found in more isolated areas, rather than in farming country or suburbs. They normally function as solitary animals or in family groups. They may be seen in larger roosting groups, but do not commonly travel in large flocks.

Now here is my challenge. I have been reading about the Chihuahuan Raven. The more I read, the less certain I am that I am seeing a Common Raven. They are so similar that one guide cautions against hasty identification. The true distinguishing characteristic: the neck feathers of the Chihuahuan Raven are white at the bases, but these are visible only when the bird ruffles its neck feathers. I have been watching, but I have yet to observe this behavior.

Well, now I am confused! Are the ravens I am seeing Common Ravens or Chihuahuan Ravens? I will just have to keep watching to find my answer. But, that's why bird watching is so interesting and challenging. Birds are found in many different habitats, with such variety and many unique behaviors.

If you also enjoy watching our native Texas birds, you may want to participate in the Great Backyard Bird Count Feb. 12-15. You can take as little as 15 minutes on one of those days – or more – to count and identify the birds in your area and report your findings.

This is a worldwide event to encourage learning about birds and gathering data. In 2020, almost 7,000 different bird species were identified in 194 countries. For more information and directions, go online to [birdcount.org](http://birdcount.org).

*Marianne Marugg is a Big Country Master Naturalist. She volunteers as an outdoor educator and conservationist in our great Texas outdoors. Texas Master Naturalists are sponsored by Texas Parks and Wildlife and Texas A&M AgriLife Extension. Find more information online at <https://txmn.tamu.edu/> or on Facebook @BCTXMN.*