

LIGHTS and SHADOWS

from the
Dishman Hills

March 2005



SOMETHING TO CROW ABOUT

If Spokane had an official tree it would be the ponderosa pine, an official rock, basalt or lava rock, or an official flower, the arrowleaf balsamroot or the primrose. We would like to humbly suggest that a good candidate for the official bird would be the crow or its close cousin the raven. Hardly a day goes by that you don't see crows or ravens hopping around on lawns, picking at road kill, or just sitting in pine trees watching the action. They have been here a long time and are part of the folklore and mythology of the Native American culture of the area. They are a part of our community and are also year-around residents of the Dishman Hills.

Crows (*Corvus brachyrhynchos*) and ravens (*Corvus corax*) are closely related, but the raven is larger, about four times heavier, and has a slightly different lifestyle than the crows. Crows are more at home in the urban landscape, being more sociable and adaptable, while ravens prefer a more solitary existence in wilder or forested areas where they can find carrion and have room to roam. Both are omnivores, and will eat about anything under the sun. These birds have been noted as "specialists in non-specialization". Other than size, differences include for the crow a flat beak and a limited vocabulary consisting mainly of "caws", and for the raven a larger curved beak with a tuft of hair on top of it, and a larger vocabulary typified by low and slow croaks.

These birds are smart. Their brains are large for birds and they show the ability to master and manipulate other creatures in their domain. From the book Bird Brains, crows and ravens are described as "not just feathered machines, rigidly programmed by their genetics. Instead, they are beings that, within the constraints of their molecular inheritance, make complex decisions and show every sign of enjoying a rich awareness." They mate for life and carry out courtships annually to reinforce their bond. They build sturdy nests in the pine trees and are good parents with both sexes caring for the young. Chicks acquire vocalizations from their parents which can reconnect them months after separation. A general trait of both is to cache excess food, and they are very good in finding cache locations in spite of time lapses or changes that occur in an area. They are good at teamwork. Several crows may distract larger birds by sneaking-up and pulling tail feathers while others swipe away the food while the bird is distracted. Within a crow flock individual rights are respected despite a relative social order, and food is not fought over. Individual flocks are territorial and are aggressive and competitive with neighboring flocks.

Crows and ravens have a dark side. They have a reputation as crop stealers, dumpster divers, and garbage dump denizens. They are the biggest victim of the West Nile Virus. They steal from other bird nests and make a lot of noise when attacked. They patiently wait (and sometimes call) for other animals to do the work for them, such as coyotes opening up carrion, cars flattening squirrels, or larger birds catching food. But they help to keep the rodent and insect populations down and cleanup after our various urban messes. In many respects they reflect the nature of our community and deserve a position of respect and appreciation.

From beans to bacteria to the scavenger-hunter bond between larval crabs and jellyfish, symbiotic relationships show that peaceful coexistence is part of the very foundation of nature.

Robert Masello, American Author (1986)

BUTTERCUP TIME

Our annual buttercup hike will on a Sunday this year, April 17th. We will meet at Camp Caro, at the southern end of Sargent Road, off Appleway Blvd. at 1pm. Some of us will be picnicking at Camp Caro before the hike. For some reason the date of this hike has slipped back from early spring when the buttercups first arrive to mid spring. The first 05 buttercups were spotted in the third week of February! Presently, the grass widows are in bloom and by next month other flowers will be out. We will tour the Natural Area for several hours and check out how things are in one of the driest years on record.

We have been busy clearing some of the trails by chain sawing off the trees that have fallen during the winter. We like to do this early in the season before hikers establish new trails around the blockage, damaging the vegetation. There are still quite a few dead trees left over from the bark beetle infestations of the 1990's, and they continue to fall when pushed by stormy winds.

Both the Dishman Hills Association and the Washington Dept. of Natural Resources agreed to decline the offer to establish a horse patrol in the Natural Area. A volunteer group of horse riders is forming with the help of the County Sheriff to provide public safety in the County new system of Conservation Areas. The Dishman Hills is a State Conservation Area established and managed to maintain the ecology, and we exclude medium impact recreational activities such as horse riding.

ORGANIZATION NEWS

We are a non-profit organization dedicated to saving nature areas in the Spokane region for public enjoyment and education. Call Michael Hamilton, 747-8147, if you have any questions. We meet every other month on the third Tuesday at Opportunity Elementary School, S. 1109 Wilbur, in the teacher's lounge, 7pm. Our next meeting will be May 17th.

The following are our February donors that have consented to be listed: Andrew Ashmore, David Cole, James Conaty, Celesta Frost, Marva Goede, Lloyd & Janet Hannink, Hobnailers, Mary Alice Jones, Janyce Keeling, Lewis Lovell, Brian Miller, William Moody, Betty Maron, Sharen Murphy, Mr. & Mrs. Orcutt, Ambrose Prestley, Victoria Sola, Dick and Lorraine Taylor, Babetta Velategui, William Vogt, Larry & Mary Wright, and two anonymous members.

Please use this form when sending **CONTRIBUTIONS** or **DUES**

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