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Exploring Our Little Corner of the World with the Galiano Naturalists

by Pam Frier

There is a raven that visits the cedar adjacent to our deck on a fairly regular basis. I'm sure it's the same raven because he drops by with a specific mission in mind every time. And although we've never been formally introduced I suspect he lives in the neighbourhood because, over the years, he's forged a steadfast, if somewhat testy, relationship with the resident dog, Dexter. Dexter always lets us know when Raven's arrived: a beleaguered "woof-woof" which, roughly translated, means "Oh no! Not you again!" And Raven always signals when the games are about to begin: a metallic "glock-glock" sound—reminiscent of the taunt of a schoolyard bully: "Na-na-na-nanah!"

I watch the game unfold. Raven settles on his favoured branch just four or five feet above his victim's head. He peers down at this rumples layabout with big hair and arthritic hips and delivers his gleeful diatribe of mocking "glocks". This, of course, drives the old dog crazy. He mutters and groans and after several failed attempts to gain rear-end traction on the slippery deck, finally heaves himself to his feet and manages a reasonable facsimile of a ferocious bark. If a raven can shrug this one surely does. If he could wink he would. But he simply delivers a dismissive "aaak aaak" and takes off. Mission accomplished.

Dogs are a relatively easy read. Ravens are not. Ravens are still a bit of a mystery even to dedicated observers like University of Vermont zoologist Bernd Heinrich who has been studying them for years. The questions we ask are the very questions Heinrich asks. Do ravens think? Do they

plan? Do they communicate— with other creatures, with humans, with each other? Do they play? What's going on inside that unfathomable "bird brain"?

Well, some of those questions have been answered— by Heinrich, Candace Savage and others— with a reasonable degree of certainty. As Candace Savage writes: ravens are "not just feathered machines, rigidly programmed by genetics . . . they make complex decisions and show every sign of enjoying a rich awareness". We've all witnessed ravens in flight execute a sudden, exuberant barrel-roll like a stunt pilot on a joy ride. That, surely, is just plain fun! Ravens have often been described as fun-loving, as well as clever, cunning— and yes— even "witty". (As in "glock glock glockity glock— what a lumpish pathetic doggie thing you are with your bed-head hair and goo-goo-googly eyes".)

Heinrich reminds us that the raven is also known as the "wolf bird", a designation earned by what appears to be a deliberate, carefully choreographed food retrieval strategy. The raven's beak is incapable of ripping open a carcass, especially a frozen one. Therefore, in order to eat, to even find food in the dead of winter, a hungry raven needs all the help it can get. So it plans ahead. It will follow a pack of wolves knowing that if there's food to be found a wolf will find it and prep it. So all the wily raven has to do is wait until the meal is cornered, carved, and ready to serve. Then, with due caution and deference, hang around the dining area until wolfish appetites are sated and company is welcome.

Following a wolf pack is one thing: leading it is another. But ravens have been observed doing just that. They will spot the prey (a bison maybe, or a bear) and they will signal the predator, be it wolf, coyote or human. Inuit hunters have reported being

guided by ravens, seeing them flying high overhead, watching as they dip a wing, veer pointedly in one direction, plunge earthward then fly back and repeat the manoeuvre until the message is clear: Come and get it!

But that's a survival tactic, more readily interpreted perhaps than the merciless teasing, just for kicks, of a lame old dog. So the question remains: do ravens do mischief just for the hell of it?

Observations by wolf researcher, L. David Mech, suggest they do. He watched several ravens shadowing a wolf pack. When a couple of the wolves lingered behind to rest the ravens took a break as well. Not to doze, but to have some fun. As Mech watched, one raven then another and another took turns swooping down on the napping animals. They would dive-bomb their heads, peck at their tails, harass them from all directions. When a wolf snapped back, the ravens would hop neatly out of reach. They worked together, like a well-drilled SWAT team, and were never in any danger. This was a raven-style sporting event and they appeared to enjoy themselves no end.

Mech doesn't say if or how the ravens vocalized during this recreational time-out. They have dozens of calls and countless unique local dialects. They've been known to mimic human voices, to "sing" in unison (like a rusty choir), to croon sweet nothings to a loved one and even talk to themselves for hours on end. But the "glock-glock" sound that marked the game-playing I witnessed has, according to Heinrich, been associated with two specific behaviours: one, by females, as a sexual invitation; and also, by the corvid family in general as a kind of "strut-your-stuff" self-assertion display.

So either a randy female has mistaken an ill-kempt arthritic dog for the love of her life or—rather more likely— a raven (male, would be my guess) harbours a recurring

need to reaffirm his dominant status. And perhaps, because a shaggy dog spread-eagled in nap-mode bears a certain resemblance to a wolf at rest, is it not possible that something hard-wired into that remarkable raven brain, triggers an ages-old urge that's simply impossible to resist? Whatever's up, Dexter is not amused.

If you want to explore the raven's world in more detail Bernd Heinrich's books are highly recommended: Ravens in Winter (available from the Conservancy library) and Mind of the Raven. You'll find Bird Brains by Candace Savage at your community library: though less comprehensive than Heinrich's studies, it is a thoroughly delightful and informative read.

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Natural Mysteries

January's mystery was: When we catch mice in our pantry, we put their little carcasses out on a stump or rock in the field, and ravens swoop down and carry off the snack. But not lately. The scavenger birds have been ignoring the mouse offerings this fall, and the little bodies stay out there for a week or more before disappearing. What's going on? Even though they're scavengers, ravens are extremely cautious about approaching food. If something has been changed about the setting in which they usually find the mouse offerings, even something quite minor, the ravens might be taking more time to assure themselves that the food is safe. On the other hand, it might be that different ravens have taken over the neighbourhood, and these new birds aren't yet completely comfortable with the feeding routine. The fact that the mouse carcasses disappeared more quickly in the summer than in the fall also could reflect a greater demand for food during the nesting season

when parent ravens have ravenous young to feed.

This month's Natural Mystery: What is the correct geological term for the pock-marked, crater-like sandstone formations we find along the east side of the island?

Have an answer? Send your thoughts to galianonaturalists@gulfislands.com. Have a Natural Mystery of your own? Let us know, and we'll try to answer it.

THE GALIANO NATURALISTS are a group of curious explorers who enjoy observing, marveling, and sharing information about the natural world around us. Come join us. (galianonaturalists@gulfislands.com)