Mind of the Raven: Investigations and Adventures with Wolf-Birds by Bernd Heinrich

Gotta Love This Raving Naturalist

Beyond croaking, Nevermore, what exactly do ravens do all day? Bernd Heinrich, biology professor at the University of Vermont and author of Ravens in Winter, has spent more than a decade learning the secrets of these giants of the crow family. He has observed startlingly complex activities among ravens, including strong pair-bonding, use of tools, elaborate vocal communication, and even play. Ravens are just plain smart, and we can see much of ourselves in their behavior. They seem to be affectionate, cranky, joyful, greedy, and competitive, just like us. And in Mind of the Raven, Heinrich makes no bones about attributing emotions and intellect to Corvus corax--just not the kind we humans can understand. He mostly catalogs their behaviors in the manner of a respectful anthropologist, although a few moments of proud papa show through when he describes the pet ravens he hand-raised to adulthood. Heinrich spends hundreds of loving hours feeding roadkill fragments to endlessly hungry raven chicks, and cold days in blinds watching wild ravens squabble and frolic. He is a passionate fan of his wolf-birds, a name he gave them when he made the central discovery of the book: that ravens in Yellowstone National Park are dependent on wolves to kill for them. Mind of the Raven offers inspiring insight into both the lives of ravens and the mind of a truly gifted scientist. --Therese Littleton

My Personal Review:
Bernd applies his multi-faceted brand of research to a species that is clearly close to his heart (the raven), with spectacular results. He weaves anecdotes and scientific studies together flawlessly to draw conclusions that are hard to argue with, if only because he refuses to draw unwarranted conclusions when the evidence isn't clear. He personally studies ravens in his northeastern home area, in Alaska, and in Germany to note the differences between different populations of the animal. He also draws extensively on his observations from his own aviary, where it seems
he is at times obsessively painstaking in recording nuances of behavior that would fly over the heads of the average bird owner.

The Good and the Bad:
This book has been done right, with a real attempt to keep the readers interest without compromising the scientific value of the work. The information given is enough to be compelling without being too boring about statistics. The end of the book gets a little more tilted towards hard science, with a fairly in-depth discussion about what warrants consciousness and intelligence, but there's no other conclusion that would be appropriate.

On the bad side, there are very occasional forays into self-indulgence, as when he takes the opportunity to argue the comments of a peer reviewer who contributed to the rejection of the publication of his study, or when a not-so-funny joke is recounted.

What I learned:
The raven is a remarkable animal, and consciousness evolves for as much of a specific reason as anything else. One bird might be given all of the instinct necessary to operate within a very narrow range of activity, but shorted on additional brain tissue, which is costly to maintain. But the raven has evolved to develop food gathering skills through problem-solving, which allows it to be much more flexible in its approach to food gathering, social interactions, and defense. This hardwired ability to solve problems manifests itself as curiosity, a desire to play, and the ability to visualize consequences without actually performing the action; this last is the most compelling criterion for awareness.

Other interesting raven facts: They can count to as high as seven. They hunt items ranging from ground squirrels to baby seals, but subsist mostly on the carrion provided by bigger predators. They lack the physical ability to pierce skin, and so have to eat through natural body openings or wounds. They have a collaborative relationship with other predators, generally wolves, which results in the ravens possibly directing the wolves to a kill so that they can take their share. This has a strange effect where they're actually uncomfortable eating from a carcass that lacks a predator as a feeding partner. This relationship has been transferred to other species where wolves are scarce, ranging from human hunters to polar bears to, possibly, a cougar, which seemed to be led to a human by a raven hoping to feast on the aftermath of a human kill. The problem-solving abilities were best demonstrated by the fact that a raven, when confronted with a piece of meat dangling from a string, will pull the string up by degrees so that it can reach the meat.

For More 5 Star Customer Reviews and Lowest Price: