NATURALLY: All about Indiana's fish crows

By ED PATTERSON
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"If men had wings and bore black feathers, few of them would be clever enough to be crows." — Henry Ward Beecher, American Congregational clergyman and abolitionist.

They are not supposed to be here, at least not according to most birding guidebooks, but Indiana, Pennsylvania, has been the home to a population of fish crows (Corvus ossifragus) for about thirty-five years. Some people do not realize that there are two types of crows in the eastern United States, the more common American crow, and the lesser-known fish crow. It's sometimes hard to visually tell the two species apart, so learning the difference between their calls is important. Both the CornellLab All About Birds website and a Girl Scouts Nations Capital Youtube video let you compare these different calls.

Fish crows, as their name implies, are most often found along the eastern seaboard in places near rivers, lakes, and other bodies of water where fish are found. However, they are generalists in their feeding habits and they have spread their range in recent years. One source I came across noted they have a preference for feeding near fast food restaurants and here in Indiana that is the certainly the case. Areas around the Sheetz in town are good places to keep an eye out for them. The Indiana University of Pennsylvania campus, Oakland Cemetery and areas near the Indiana Feed and Supply store are also places to look for them. Just think! IUP's mascot could have been the uniquely named IUP Fish Crows, instead of the generic Crimson Hawks!

I had heard that fish crows were found in Indiana Borough but I was unable to positively identify them. Then, while walking through Blue Spruce Park one Friday afternoon, I came across Dr. Ray Winstead. Ray had two cellphones in his hands, and he was trying to determine which phone worked best with the Merlin ID app, a free bird-call app available from the Cornell Lab of Ornithology. Of course, we stopped to talk about birds and somehow fish crows came up in the conversation. Ray introduced me to Merlin ID and also mentioned that while teaching at IUP one day, many years ago, he heard a fish crow call outside his classroom window. Ray was familiar with fish crows from his time spent down South along coastal areas and was surprised to hear one in this area.



Submitted photo

INDIANA HAS been the home to a population of fish crows for about 35 years.

The next day I stopped at the Sheetz on Fourth Street and noticed some crow-like birds sitting on the electric lines. Even though it was very noisy around the gas pumps, I decided to pull out my phone and launch the Merlin ID app.

The fish crow call is described as a short, nasal, often doubled "cah" note. What I heard was unquestionably different from the typical American crow call and after a few moments the Merlin Id app pinged it as a fish crow. I replayed the call recorded on my phone and then compared it to the other calls listed on the app ... definitely a fish crow!

In some cities and towns, certain birds and animals are adopted as the town mascot. Brevard, North Carolina, is known for its white squirrels. Churchill, Manitoba, has its polar bears. San Francisco has its parrots. And, of course, there's that famous groundhog from Punxsutawney. Indiana is best known as the hometown of Jimmy Stewart ... might the town one day adopt the fish crow as its mascot?

Here are some interesting facts about fish crows, courtesy of the Cornell Lab of Ornithology:

- Fish crows save surplus food when they find a good source, hiding the food for later use in grass, moss, or even crevices in trees.
- Fish crows are known to raid the nests of other birds, dig up the turtle eggs, and even steal food that other birds have collected.
- Fish crows mate for life and can be spotted grooming their partners.
- Fish crows build a new, well-made nest each year.
- The oldest known fish crow was 14 years, 6 months old.

— CornellLab, All About Birds, fish crow, Cool Facts

Ed Patterson is director of Indiana County Parks & Trails. The Naturally columns are brought to you each month by the Indiana Gazette and Friends of White's Woods to showcase the wonders of nature in our area.