

IN BRIEF

A PARLIAMENT OF CROWS

by Joanna Seabrook



They are ravens really, but on the farms we still call them crows.

On our farm, out past York, there is a paddock called the Racecourse, so called because in very early days a race meeting or two was held there. It is a graceful paddock with groups of trees in two of its corners, measuring about 150 or so acres, with a rise towards the back and centre, so from the farm angle it presents an open picture.

In my life of 23 years on the farm an extraordinary phenomenon has occurred at least twice, perhaps three times, and always in the same place, the Racecourse paddock.

A gathering or convocation of hundreds and hundreds of crows. They must come from near and far and they talk in crow and talk and talk. Sometimes they fly about, not away, just there and land again, still calling and talking loudly and continuously. Sometimes groups will fly together, wheeling and circling in a great spiral high into the sky and come down to join in the discussion again. It is impossible to think of it as anything else but a discussion.

They will stay two or three days and then leave, not as a body but gradually, until only the usual residents are left.

I have observed this curious occurrence enough times to understand it is a real happening.

For one person to have seen it on a number of occasions, it must happen many times; it leaves me with questions about our usual perception of birds as mindless creatures who live by innate motivations. I have even, once, seen it happen in Helena Valley, just west of Scott Street.

These birds are often seen in pairs and sometimes in groups of three to five, very seldom any more at one time. Other people's experiences would be welcome.

I do not think the importance of crows and ravens can be overstated. They will eat dead things, clean up after lambing, deal with grasshoppers and other ground dwelling pests. One wonders what plagues would attack us if these birds became scarce. It would be good to see some scientific work take place to lead to understanding of their place in our farm ecology and the consequences of a lessening in their population.

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Has anybody else noticed this? Please let us know so that we can pass on the information to an Honours student just starting a study of ravens. - Ed