

# Focus on the Jackdaw

Our smallest crow is perhaps a more frequent visitor to gardens than is generally realised, especially during the breeding season when they have a very hungry brood to feed. Naturally cliff and crag nesters, they are now found in many town centres, where buildings and especially their chimneys provide an ideal alternative breeding habitat.

The Jackdaw is a familiar bird to most people, with its black and grey plumage and the startling pale eye of the adult. Their loud ringing cries and the marvellous acrobatics that the birds often indulge in are only upstaged by the much rarer Chough. Sociable birds, Jackdaws often breed in loose colonies. In my part of Norfolk they are still (legally) the targets of the gamekeepers, as they do take some Pheasant and partridge eggs and young. The nest boxes and natural tree holes in my garden are well occupied by wily Jackdaws seeking sanctuary. At the moment there are about ten nests on the go in only two and a half acres and all at the same time, as Jackdaws have just one breeding attempt each year. They make up for this by being long-lived birds. The oldest ringed bird recovered so far was more than 14 years old!

Jackdaws pair up long term, often for life. Pairs fly around together at any time of year and even in a big winter feeding flock pairs can be picked out. When the female is busy laying eggs the male is especially vigilant and both adults put a tremendous amount of effort into rearing the young and finding enough food for them. In fact in most normal years the parents are unable to rear all the chicks, some fall by the wayside before they fledge. Four or five eggs are laid but the female starts incubating half way through the clutch, so that the last two will be smaller and are the most likely casualties if food is short. Nestlings have to be fed for almost five weeks. For the first ten days the male mostly forages alone as the female has to brood the chicks, especially if the weather is cool. The more noise they make the hungrier they are, a quiet nest is a contented nest! Even after leaving the nest, the parents still feed them assiduously for more than a month.

The intelligence of Jackdaws is legendary and they figure in myths throughout Europe. They are supposed to steal jewellery and keep it in their nests but there seems to be no truth in this for wild birds. However tame birds can easily be trained to perform tricks. A recent story from Italy told of a Jackdaw trained by thieves to swoop down and take money from startled cash machine users! There are several stories of Jackdaws caring for injured relatives. In one case a surprised birdwatcher noticed a Jackdaw taking food to a nest in the late summer. Inside, he discovered a perfectly healthy and fully-grown young Jackdaw tethered to the nest by a tangle of wool. The youngster had been there for as long as three months. In another case an adult Jackdaw with well-developed cataracts

in both eyes was found in good condition under a cliff where there were several nests. Completely blind, it cannot have fed itself for some considerable time so another bird, presumably its mate, must have been bringing it food. *Chris Mead*

## Jackdaw

### Fascinating Facts

#### Jack in a box

If you are DIY-orientated it is quite easy to build your own nestboxes for both Jackdaws and Stock Doves and often rewarding too, as there is frequently a lack of suitable sites and the birds will be grateful for more or less anything. However, producing an ideal box in which these relatively large species can breed successfully year after year requires a bit more thought, and care with siting. Commercial 'woodcrete' boxes are ideal and almost indestructible, but they are rather expensive. I have had success with old mortar ammunition boxes almost four feet long, they were intended for Tawny Owls! Otherwise, a large tit box is basically what is needed but do use decently thick planks so that it is well insulated. This will make it pretty heavy, so take care when installing and choose a strong and safe mounting method. A homemade box for either species should be about 45cm high and about 25cm square internally, with an entrance (round or square) about 12cm across. Both Jackdaws and Stock Doves can be quite shy nesters. They will use boxes in the open, four metres or so up a tree, but actually prefer the box to be partly concealed, perhaps by ivy or other climbers.

#### Jack in a pot

As well as in the nooks and crannies of rocks and cliffs, Jackdaws like to nest in old broken-off tree branches with hollow ends. They readily adapted to chimney pots, which probably seem to them like a combination of their two favourite sites. There are difficulties though. Chimneys tend to be in groups, and the birds will often drop sticks down all the available holes until a few lodge across and the nest can be built. This uses up a lot of sticks, and even then is not necessarily a lasting solution. The nest can get too large for its precarious foundation and the whole thing crash down into your fireplace!

#### Jack on a rig

Ringed does not show many of our Jackdaws going a long way but four Scandinavian birds have been found, seven Danish, one German, 14 Dutch and five Belgian. In fact, movements across the North Sea seem quite regular as the birds are found on oil installations. Even more interesting are the winter records of birds with very pale grey hoods, almost white at the base. These are probably birds from the Eastern Baltic where the distinctive race *soemmerringii* lives.



Jackdaw by Tommy Holden © BTO