

The crow next 'daw': Jackdaw



Jackdaw, by Jill Pakenham

The silvery white iris is something that develops as an individual ages. Young birds have bluish-coloured eyes; these first turn dull brown, then slowly become a dull white before, at a year of age or more, they turn silvery-white.



Gregarious in habits and resourceful in nature, the Jackdaw is a familiar garden visitor. Garden use peaks during early June, at a time when the birds are faced with the challenge of a brood hungry for invertebrates and other morsels. As you will discover, one of the most engaging things about this, the smallest of the European crows, is its social behaviour.

SOCIAL STRUCTURE

The basic unit of Jackdaw society is the pair, and most individuals establish a life-long pair bond. Young birds probably pair during their first autumn, even though they do not breed for the first time until their second year of life. Watch a flock of Jackdaws in the skies above your garden during early spring and you'll soon spot the established pairs, the two birds flying close to one another and apart from other pairs.

Occasionally you will see a female, typically an older, unpaired bird, following an established

pair. She may succeed in breaking the pair apart, replacing the original female, although this appears to be relatively uncommon. 'Divorce' does occur for other reasons but is costly to the individuals concerned, often with an associated loss of status and/or nest site. Widowed or divorced males attempt to retain their nest site but are likely to be attacked by their neighbours. If they can hold onto the site then they may be courted by one or more unpaired females.

The two members of the pair share responsibilities, with both involved in defence of the nest, its construction and care of the resulting young. The birds tend to remain close to their breeding colony throughout the winter months, and will visit their nest site on a regular basis. The pair bond is reinforced through social behaviour, such as allopreening (where one bird preens another, often around the neck and head).

BRINGING UP BABY

The Jackdaw is a cavity nesting species, although there are cases of birds constructing 'open' nests within thick vegetation (e.g. a tall conifer hedge). A wide variety of cavities is used, from chimneys,



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holes in cliff faces through to nest boxes and even attics. The birds will then construct a nest to fit the available space, using sticks to make the foundation and finishing with a lined nest cup some 12-16 cm in diameter. Where the nest is in a tree cavity, only a few dozen sticks may be needed but a large space, such as a chimney, may require a good many more. I once visited the attic of an abandoned cottage that contained a nest that was eight feet across at the base and nearly three feet high.

Although the female may lay up to nine eggs, incubation usually begins from the second or third egg (many bird species don't start until the clutch is complete or virtually complete) and so the eggs hatch asynchronously. The resulting young differ in size and strength. Since it is the chick which holds its head highest that tends to receive food, in times of food shortage it is the youngest and weakest chicks that starve, giving the older chicks a better chance of survival.

During the first few days after hatching the male provides food for both the chicks and his mate, leaving her to look after the young. She may leave the nest to preen, and exercise briefly, at which stage the male will remain in her place, so these off-nest bouts tend to happen just after the male has made a feeding visit. Older chicks are left unattended, allowing both parents to find food, the returning adult uttering a short 'tuk' call as it enters the nest cavity.

ON THE MOVE – OR STAY AT HOME

As you have probably worked out from watching your own local Jackdaws, our birds are fairly sedentary in their habits, perhaps only moving a few kilometres come winter when they join Carrion Crows and Rooks in mixed corvid roosts. This is not what happens in other parts of their (largely) European range. In Eastern Europe, for example, Jackdaws are migratory, with birds making significant movements ahead of winter and returning again in spring. Some birds from southern Scandinavia may even winter in Britain and Ireland but we know very little about the extent of this behaviour because so few Jackdaws are caught during the winter months. Most ringing of Jackdaws takes place at the nest site, often where the species has occupied boxes erected for birds like Barn Owl.

The seasonal pattern of garden use, evident from your weekly Garden BirdWatch returns, reflects the bird's changing resource needs rather than movements between habitats. The greatest use of garden feeding

stations matches the period when the food demands of the growing young are at their peak and adults do appear to be under some pressure to source enough food for their hungry brood.

Some of the use of garden feeding stations goes undetected, not least because Jackdaws often arrive to feed very early in the morning, soon after dawn and before most folk are up. Wander through a town or city centre just after dawn and you may well see them scavenging food waste or raiding litter bins.

While other members of the crow family are often regarded as vermin, I suspect that our attitudes towards the Jackdaw are somewhat more affectionate. This may be because the species lives alongside many of us or because it has a social structure centred around the life-long pair-bond. Of course, it could be the resourceful nature of the Jackdaw and the sense of strong personality, evident when these delightful birds put in an appearance at the bird table. ■



▲ Adult Jackdaws should be familiar enough, with the silvery-grey nape and sides of the neck. Young birds, however, have a more uniform appearance and show less contrast between the black and grey.

FACTBOX: Jackdaw *Corvus monedula*

Population:

Breeding: 503,000 pairs

Winter: currently unknown

Conservation status:

GREEN

Diet: Invertebrates, fruit, seeds, carrion, occasionally small vertebrates or eggs; nestlings eat invertebrates.

Longevity:

Typical lifespan: 5 years

Max recorded lifespan: 15 years, 11 months and 16 days

Breeding Ecology:

Clutch size: 4-5 (range 2-9) eggs

Number of broods: 1

Incubation: 20 days

Young in nest: 32-33 days

Age at first breeding: 2 years



Jackdaw egg, by Mike Toms

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