



Rook

Species focus

by Mike Toms

Rook, by John Harding

The Rook is a species embedded within the British rural landscape. Its presence can be seen in the literature and oral traditions of generations of rural inhabitants and its colonial tree-top nests stand testament to a species that has adapted to changing times. Nowhere else within Europe, with perhaps the exception of Belarus, has a breeding population that approaches ours in size. Quite rightly, the Rook stands as a totem – though not necessarily an easy bedfellow – for our agricultural heritage.

A CAUTIOUS VISITOR

Unsurprisingly, given the association with lowland farmland, it is rural gardens that are most likely to be visited by Rooks, with birds often visiting in small groups to exploit bird table fare. As with other members of the crow family, visits are usually made early in the morning and often before householders are up and about, underlining that these birds are wary in the presence of humans. Alison Greggor, a PhD student who sought help from Garden BirdWatch participants for her study on the interactions between crows and people, found that rural Rooks were less approachable than certain other members of the crow family. Alison also found regional differences in approachability, with Rooks in Scotland and Ireland more approachable than those elsewhere in Britain.

The wariness results from persecution, the Rook targeted because of the damage done to newly-planted crops. Rooks can inflict heavy, but typically localised, damage to crops. Rooks are resourceful and quick

to exploit seasonal opportunities, however provided. Large quantities of cereal grain may be taken if available and newly-sown seed can be a particular favourite – Rooks quickly lose interest in grain once it has sprouted. Other crops, notably potatoes, are sometimes taken and Rooks may also exploit animal feed and raid orchards for apples and other fruits.

Control has often taken the form of shooting out active nests with young. This has not always been successful for two reasons. Firstly, shooting at established nesting colonies tends to lead to greater dispersal, with more birds nesting in smaller colonies scattered over a much larger area – this makes them harder to control. Secondly, shooting young birds may simply remove many individuals that were going to die anyway, leaving the remaining young with a greater share of the available resources and increasing their chances of fledging successfully (see *Tough Times*).

Not all Rooks are equally wary, however, and some are remarkably confiding. Such behaviour tends to be seen where individuals have access to food in large rural or suburban gardens. It may also be seen in some urban areas, where the birds may both feed and nest in the absence of persecution.

WINTER SPECTACULAR

The social nature of the Rook is also evident outside of the breeding season. In the failing light of a late winter afternoon, the sight of a mixed flock of Carrion Crows, Jackdaws and Rooks, gathered prior to going into roost, can be a true wildlife spectacle. Such gatherings are

a feature of the winter landscape, the communal roosts providing birds with the opportunity to discover who has had a successful day feeding in the fields and who might be worth following in the morning to discover an easy meal. Some of these gatherings may number many thousands of individuals – one in Scotland reportedly numbered 65,000 birds – and individuals may join the roosts from some distance away. Small flocks of Rooks often travel along well-defined lines of flight to join other individuals just before dark close to the location of the roost itself. As darkness falls so the birds move into the roost proper.

COLONIAL HABITS

Rookeries are lively affairs and, with breeding activity starting very early in the year, they provide one of the most welcome signs of the approaching spring. Most English rookeries hold fewer than 50 nests but some may hold considerably more, a pattern that is perhaps more commonplace north of the border and into the Scottish lowlands.

Each nest, and the sticks that it contains, are a valuable asset and some Rooks are prone to ‘lifting’ sticks from nearby nests to add to their own. Many of the individuals involved in pilfering sticks are young birds, and small parties of such individuals may attempt to raid unguarded nests. This is why female Rooks may be seen standing sentinel over their nests from early in the season, while their mates seek out nesting material. It is only once the pair begins to line the nest that the female may join her mate in collecting new material.

Being fairly long-lived and somewhat sedentary birds, Rooks tend to remain with their mate for several years, particularly if they enjoy successful breeding attempts together. The two members of the pair may be seen roosting together, even when they join the huge communal roosts that are a feature of the winter months in many areas.

TOUGH TIMES

The use of gardens by Rooks peaks in April, matching the time when most pairs will have young chicks in the nest. These chicks are brooded by the female initially, the male’s role at this stage being the delivery of food to the nest. Some of this food is passed to the female but most is provided to the chicks. Invertebrate prey is of particular importance at this stage, with earthworms and leatherjackets (the larvae of craneflies) the most commonly provided prey items at most nests.

Young Rooks do not necessarily all emerge from their eggs at the same time. Such ‘asynchronous hatching’ has its roots in the fact that the female Rook may initiate incubation before she has completed her clutch. Although not as pronounced as in certain other species (e.g. owls), this asynchronous hatching may help the Rooks to raise at least some of their young during difficult years, the smaller chicks

FACTBOX: Rook *Corvus frugilegus*



Rook, by John Harding

Population:

Breeding: 1.2 million breeding pairs

Winter: currently unknown

Conservation status: GREEN-LISTED

Diet: Invertebrates, especially beetles and earthworms. Also cereal grain, small vertebrates and carrion

Longevity:

Typical lifespan: 6 years

Max recorded lifespan: 22 years, 11 months and 0 days

Breeding Ecology:

Clutch size: 4–5 eggs

Number of broods: 1

Incubation: 16–19 days

Young in nest: 30–36 days

Age at first breeding: 2 years

www.bto.org/birdfacts



▲ Rooks can be more difficult to identify when seen in flight. Look for the white face of adult birds and the gently broadening tail. Check out the BTO video guide to corvid identification, available on the BTO website.

losing out to their older siblings and being the first to succumb if times are hard. A study of 29 Rook broods found that 90% of the nestlings that died during the nesting period had been the last to emerge from their egg.

The nestling period is a challenging one for the adult Rooks too. Initially, the male is the sole provider, supporting the entire family but the female joins him in this task once the chicks have reached roughly 12 days of age. During this period the adults deliver most of the food collected to the chicks, keeping very little for themselves. As a result, the adults typically lose weight over this period.

Things do not necessarily get any easier once the young have left the nest because the dry summer months force favoured soil-dwelling invertebrates to a greater depth, taking them out of reach of probing beaks. Adult food requirements increase at this time as they begin their annual moult and birds spend more time feeding than is the case during any other part of the year. Even with increased effort the adults are still not taking in as much food as they do in other seasons. Mortality of recently-fledged juvenile birds is also high at this time.

STRIKING A POSE

Perhaps because Rooks are a colonial-nesting bird, we tend to see a lot of display and signalling behaviours in this species. Many of the displays are used to communicate status or nest ownership and one of the most commonly seen behaviours is the bowing and fanning

display. This is usually given when an individual is approached by another Rook, or following a quarrel over ownership of a particular piece of tree-top real estate. During this display the bird bows its whole body forward, at the same time lifting and fanning its tail. The display is invariably accompanied by a loud cawing call. Other postures are used to reinforce the pair bond or to solicit copulations. Display is important because it helps to resolve conflicts and support social status without the need for costly aggression and conflict.

CHANGING TIMES

There is a sense that the Rook's position as a garden bird might be changing. Results from the Garden Bird Feeding Survey (GBFS) show a substantial increase in the winter use of gardens from 1990 through until 2006, since when the use of rural gardens has fallen away again somewhat. However, the latest GBFS results show garden use to be some way above what it was prior to 1990 and it will be fascinating to see what happens over the next few years.

There is certainly scope for finding out more about the way in which Rooks use gardens and to determine which foods they favour and when. We will be getting in touch with a number of the Garden BirdWatch participants who record visiting Rooks, the idea being to collect some new information through a targeted questionnaire. We will then report back on our findings. ■

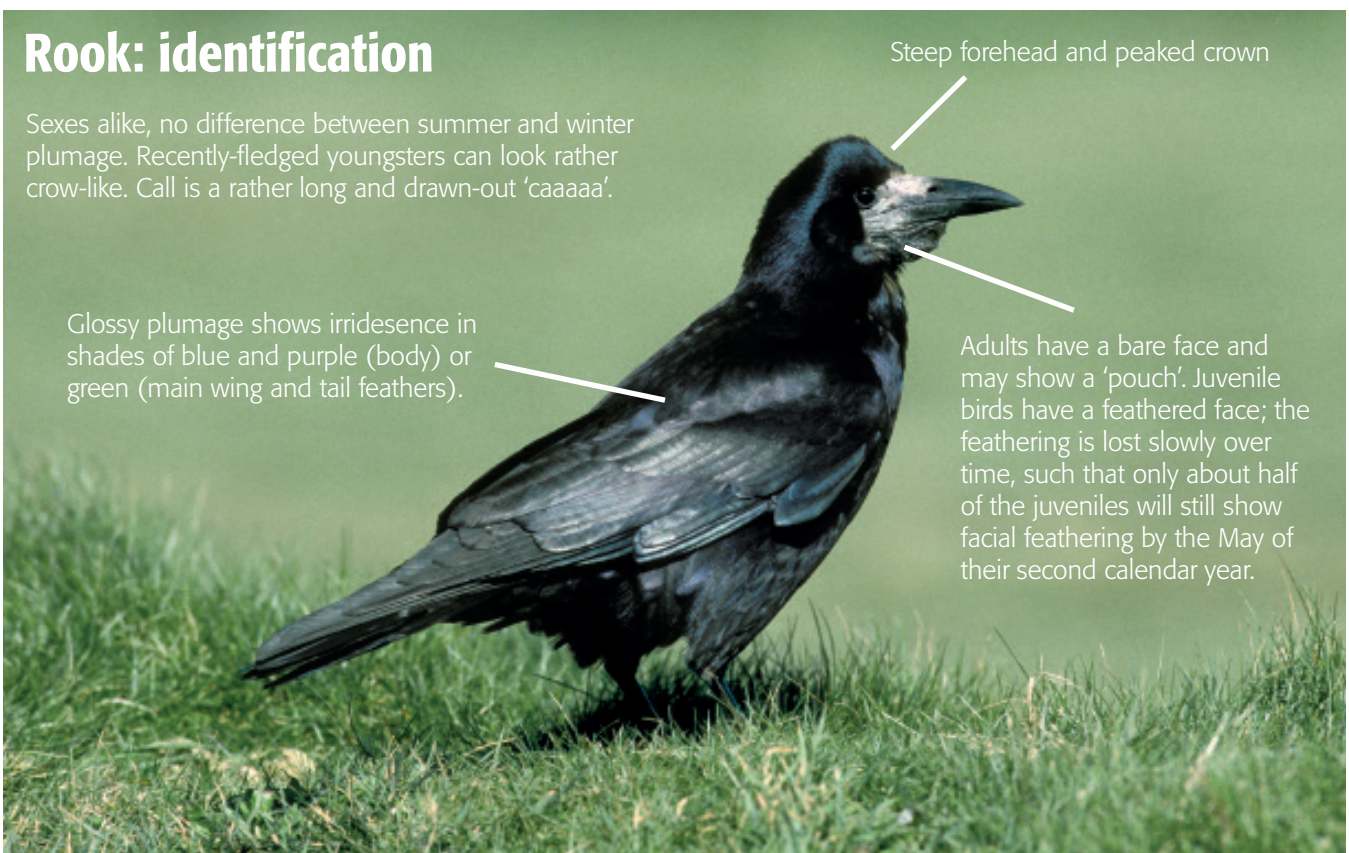
Rook: identification

Sexes alike, no difference between summer and winter plumage. Recently-fledged youngsters can look rather crow-like. Call is a rather long and drawn-out 'caaaaa'.

Glossy plumage shows irridescence in shades of blue and purple (body) or green (main wing and tail feathers).

Steep forehead and peaked crown

Adults have a bare face and may show a 'pouch'. Juvenile birds have a feathered face; the feathering is lost slowly over time, such that only about half of the juveniles will still show facial feathering by the May of their second calendar year.



Rook, © Paul Sterry (www.naturephotographers.co.uk)