

They are gathered on the frozen fields in a murder so massive the ground is covered as far as the eye can see, their oily feathers glistening, their alert eyes watching, hidden in their pitch-black faces. Hitchcock might rise from the grave for this, his ultimate shot. Here they are: "Grim, ungainly, ghastly, gaunt and ominous bird of yore."

Ulrich Watermann sizes up the enemy and is amazed. A falconer by trade, he has just been hired as the principal birdchaser for the nearby city of Chatham, Ont., population 44,000. The people there tell him that, for the past few winters, crows have been invading their streets in squadrons that fill the skies. They roost on power lines, foul the sidewalks with excrement and pollute the air with a loathsome, sleep-killing wall of noise. Each year their numbers have grown. The city estimates that one-quarter of a million crows arrived in January of 2000. Now it's the end of October. City officials are bracing for another invasion of similar size. The tall, mustachioed Watermann, who knows birds like Poe knew poetry, looks upon that dark army staging in the field and makes his own calculation: the city has underestimated.

About the same time, another beauti-

ful fall is fading from the historic town of Auburn in the Finger Lakes region in upstate New York. The highest point in town is a cemetery, and in its graves lie some of Auburn's finest citizens. Here, long ago, the Cayuga people buried their dead. It is sacred ground. As the sun sets through the trees, black devils sit silently in the branches. Fifty thousand crows have come to little Auburn in the autumn of 2000.

And they are still coming, every winter, to roost. In fact, all around North America, from Kentville, N.S., to Middle Fork River Valley, Ill., to Yuba City, Calif., crows are flying into our towns and cities on black highways of their own creation. Throughout the winter, they stream into warm urban sprawls as dusk settles and return to the countryside at dawn, their arrivals and departures lasting for an hour at a time. It is a phenomenon that must be seen to be believed. Crows have always roosted, at times in large numbers and sometimes in cities. But never like this. These gigantic displays fill observers with wonder, fear or anger.

Why is it happening? What is making them do this, these scavengers that move in flocks known as murders, whose dead bodies are showing us the spread of the West Nile virus and whose legends cast

them as ominous harbingers of doom? Are these bloated winter congregations signs of something apocalyptic?

No place knows crows like Chatham. Here, three hours west of Toronto, the rolling hills of the east flatten out into Ontario prairies. Trees are scarcer too, and fields filled with pumpkins and corn stretch for miles. The warm Thames River winds gently into town, flowing past the main street. The people are farmers, factory workers, hard-working Canadians, living in a perfect setting for a cheery Hitchcock beginning.

In the past, Chathamites would see crows in small groups in the country during the summers and spot them in the big, old trees in larger numbers in winter. People were occasionally upset by their cawing or by their unerring ability to spy oozing morsels of garbage. But everyone lived together amicably. Sure, a farmer shot a crow from time to time when the rascal tried to steal his corn, but that was life. Man and the birds got along.

Then, sometime in the mid-1990s, things began to change. The overall crow population wasn't rising dramatically, but the early part of the decade had seen a sudden climb in the numbers roosting in towns in winter, especially in nearby Essex and the surrounding region, down Windsor way. Chatham's count had gone up too, reaching 40,000 in 1995, a sometimes offputting but manageable group. Each year they dispersed to the country when spring came. But by 1997 the city's winter roost had grown beyond 80,000, and the following year it increased again. Essex had taken measures to drive them out of town. When Essex's flock sizes went down, its neighbour's went up. Then Chatham's numbers exploded.

Crow Flies

Flocks of black birds are invading our cities in numbers not seen since *The Birds*. What message do they bring? BY SHANE PEACOCK

PHOTOGRAPHY BY ROB NELSON

Crows are counted by organizations that do their figuring during the winter roosts. It's called the Christmas bird count, and it's taken as one year turns to the next. As the year 2000 began, Chatham's crow population had reached a stunning 160,000. But George Segært, a mild-mannered guy who doesn't seem given to exaggeration, and who dealt closely with the situation as a manager of public works for the Chatham-Kent municipality, says that even that number was low. He explains that the count was done on just one side of town; he believes the correct estimate was 250,000. Then, as autumn came to a close in 2000, and as Ulrich Watermann arrived to discover more crows massing in the outlying fields, the numbers got biblical. "It was big-time," Segært says. "It was close to 800,000. It was phenomenal." Watermann believes there were millions of birds.

The crows would come in from all directions at nightfall in groups of up to 60,000 and roost on the perimeter of the main streets. Memories of that astonishing invasion are still vivid in Chatham citizens' minds. "Some people called it amazing," remarks Sheila Bateman, a hotel manager, "others called it something else. When you came into town at night and saw them, it was haunting. It was like Hitchcock." Wayne Pollock, a municipal employee, still marvels at their arrivals and departures, and remembers the crows sitting silently in the trees in awesome numbers.

Over at Heuvelmans car dealership on Keil Drive, general manager Jason Heuvelmans is still wide-eyed about it. "Every night they would fly in from the country, just flocks of them overhead. All the trees on the Union Gas's property were filled with crows. It was quite a sight." A few times, the crows massed on a nearby transformer and blew out some of the dealership's computers; most days their thick layer of droppings, which came down like rain, meant the Heuvelmans had to keep scrubbing down their cars. At times the excrement ate the paint. In the night, the crows would often head over to the river and line it like a massive audience wait-

ing for a show. Then, as citizens drove to work at dawn, they'd see the birds streaming back out of town.

Scientists have several

explanations for why crows are acting this way. Both Allen Woodliffe, district ecologist with the Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources in Chatham, and Kevin McGowan, a crow expert at Cornell University in Ithaca, N.Y., say that urban areas have many crow-friendly attributes. "We've got garbage on our front door," says Woodliffe. "We've got a landfill not too far away, and we're surrounded by agriculture, all perfect sources of food – and, with milder winters, there's very little snow to cover that up. As well, Chatham is, at least from a crow's viewpoint, probably the largest forested area in the municipality." Crows like tall trees, where they can nest, spot food and see their deadly predator the great horned owl. They settle in sparse woods in the countryside in summer, then find a bonanza of big trees in town in winter. Cities are warmer than the frozen fields, and as our temperatures rise, they are becoming more attractive for roosting. Cities are lighted too, which provides security against night-loving owls. As well, both Chatham and Auburn have warm rivers flowing through their downtown areas.

Increasing warmth, lights, a river, farmland and garbage. For crows, Chatham has it all. Stroll through the pristine natural setting of Point Pelee National Park, 40 minutes away, and you won't see masses of crows. They're all in town. It's the same for many other similarly situated cities. Crows admire our polluted, unnaturally warm, urban world. As McGowan once said, "They like what we've done with North America."

When the crows began invading in large numbers, Chatham responded with understandable alarm. The bird waste was so thick on sidewalks that some were impassable, as if coated by Ghostbuster slime. The cacophony of caws in one area rendered senior citizens sleepless and distraught. And then, of

course, there was this weird feeling of impending doom about it all. Not to mention the constant media stories about the West Nile virus – carried, it was believed, by these legendary evil birds.

Some shot to kill. Former mayor Bill Erickson, a professed "bird lover," condoned it in the early stages. His brother, a rural resident, even set up a crow shooting contest in 1999 in which one deadeye rifleman bagged a surreal 90 little bad boys in a single outing. But even if they could live with the criticism of animal rights groups and the redneck look of such endeavours, it was going to take many, many winters of massacring hundreds of crows a day to make even a dent in them. Generations of crow murderers would be needed for such genocide. But what was to be done?

Other cities experiencing the same problems were just as irrational. Shots were being fired, fireworks set off, crow distress calls were sounding in towns like air-raid signals, and in Springfield, Mass., the citizens even raised helium balloons, complete with huge "evil eyes." The crows would go away... and then come back.

In Auburn the reaction was similar at first. But one day a bird-loving sort named Steve Johnson entered the fray. He's in charge of information technologies in this city of some 30,000. As the crows began gathering at Fort Hill Cemetery, then massed at the city's prison, citizens started shouting about them at city council. "These people were screaming bloody murder. They wanted the police to go out and start shooting the crows out of the trees," laughs the amiable Johnson at his downtown office. "I was the first person to voice an opinion in favour of leaving the roost alone."

As ideas brewed for ways to drive the birds out of Auburn, Johnson began formulating his own plan. He did some research and quickly became acquainted with the situation in other places, as amazed as others had been at this weird change in crow behaviour. He located Professor McGowan, half an hour down the road at Cornell University, and began learning more about crows and their

habits. He also read about the shooting going on in Chatham and was not amused, calling it "the Death City of Canada." There had to be other ways to deal with the problem. Or was one of nature's shifts really a problem? Why not embrace it as a truly wonderful phenomenon?

But Steve Johnson has never been to Chatham. He has simply seen the figures for the Christmas counts, the ones that topped out at 160,000. He thought Chatham had about three times as many crows as Auburn. He didn't know that if his skies were dotted, theirs were pitch black.

The crows in this part

of the world are called American crows, *Corvus brachyrhynchos*. And they are the worst sort of bird to be massing in your town, not because of what they are but because of their legend. Crows, it seems, have an image problem.

"It's a northern European cultural thing about big black birds," says McGowan. He's a bespectacled, friendly guy who seems casual and unprofessorial until you turn his lights on in conversation. That means mentioning the word "crow." Instantly he becomes a fount of fascinating information, and a bit peeved at uninformed opinions. He's at the Cornell Laboratory of Ornithology, an idyllic place of swamps and birds near Ithaca, N.Y. Bird pictures are perched everywhere in his office. He arrives carrying a box with a disarmingly large stuffed crow peering over the top. Seems *U.S. News & World Report* is wondering about crow invasions too and needs a picture. Crows get a bad rap, McGowan theorizes, not just because of their dark colour and appearance but because they are carrion eaters associated with death – our vultures. "Northern Europeans disliked crows and ravens," says McGowan, "because they didn't have vultures."

Gulp. Hundreds of thousands of vultures converging on Chatham?

"If you had 100,000 cardinals coming into your backyard, maybe people would like that a little bit better," he says smiling. It is a heavenly thought.

Crows have other image problems.

Myths, literature and the movies haven't been kind. There are crow's feet on aging faces, eating crow is what we do when we've been shown up, and crowing about anything isn't something nice people do. Merely seeing crows can be bad luck. Margaret Atwood's *Alias Grace* recounts that encountering three together portends bad luck. And of course there's Poe. His account of the crow's larger first cousin, "The Raven," perching on his windowsill forever crowing "Nevermore!" and reminding him of the loss of his beloved, branded the bird as a symbol of darkness. Then there's Hitchcock. Sure, there are gulls and other birds that swarm poor gentle Bodega Bay, terrifying even manly rock-jawed Rod Taylor and the helpless gorgeous blond Tippi Hedren, but it's the crows that grab you. Dark, smart and cawing, they bounce up and down on playground monkey bars behind Hedren's back in one shot, then grow to horrific numbers in the next. They tear the eyes out of citizens, then nearly rip poor Hedren apart. Hitchcock plays on a deep-seated human fear of birds. The day will come, he is whispering, when they will take their vengeance upon us.

Crows make an ugly noise; they are aggressive and nasty; they fight other birds in flocks; they eat dead things and garbage. But are they really dark, oily criminals we should fear?

Not everyone feels that way. Various North American native cultures, for example, respect them. There is even a nation named for them. Maybe that's why, when the crows came to Auburn, they gathered at the ancient burial grounds usurped by the white man. Many natives consider crows and ravens truly remarkable beings. And they are right.

McGowan pops a CD into his computer. On the screen a New Caledonian crow is being studied in a lab. It stands beside an upright tube with a bucket of food deep inside. A short piece of wire lies nearby. The crow realizes that it cannot get its beak far enough inside the tube to pull out the bucket. It spots the wire. Picking it up in its beak, it reaches over the top of the tube and extends the wire down to the

bucket. But there's a problem. Although the wire will reach the food, it can't pick it up. That's when things get eerie. The crow immediately pulls out the wire, sticks it in a crack in the tube and bends it around the exterior. Then it shifts its freshly minted hooked tool in its beak, dips it deep into the tube – and hooks out the bucket of food! Scientists say this makes the crow the first animal other than a human being to create a new tool and to understand how its shape relates to its function.

In his fascinating book *Mind of the Raven*, Bernd Heinrich tells of ravens carrying two doughnuts simultaneously, thrusting their heads into the hole of one and grasping the other with their beaks. Crows and ravens have unusually large brains. Pigeons weigh the same as crows, but have about one-fifth their grey matter. McGowan believes we have only begun to understand their abilities.

There are many stories about crows. One tells of three men hiding in a duck blind while hunting crows, waiting for the birds to fly so they can take a crack at them. But the crows just sit on a distant tree branch. Finally the hunters decide to fool them. Two leave the duck blind. The crows stay put – because three minus two means one is left. In Chatham the crows learned to recognize garbage trucks, and lined the routes ahead of them.

Some of their abilities go beyond brainpower. McGowan once observed a female crow sitting on a fence, so ill it was unable to move. A male crow came by and began feeding it, and continued to do so at intervals. But such love for each other is common. Crows mate for life and have extended families in which offspring help to look after the eggs and raise chicks. Crows stand sentry for one another and materialize out of nowhere in battalions to fight off villains (such as owls, who love to intercept crows, rip off their heads and feet and fly away with the tasty torso).

Ornithologists are discovering that there is complexity to crow communication too. The environmental conditions to which they're adapting in our cities have existed for a long time, but they have only

changed their habits lately. Why? The answer may lie in something that we would have considered ludicrous until recently: crow talk. "Crows do have a cultural transmission of information; they do tell each other a large number of things," McGowan says. "They're telling the rest of the birds, hey, follow us," suggests George Segart in Chatham. Look down there: warm streets, lights at night, trees in perfect rows... and look at all that garbage. Spread the word, and form a line.

Ulrich Watermann

knows how smart crows are and how to deal with them. He is sort of the mother of all bird control specialists. He likes to wear a safari hat and shirt and big brown boots; he has a salt and pepper moustache and a steely look in his blue eyes. Once the people who ran the city of Chatham realized that, to correct the crow problem, they needed to use their brains at least as much as the birds were using theirs, they turned to Watermann's Bird Control International. They offered him \$50,000 to chase out the crows (\$25,000 if he failed). He has a whole regiment of falcons on his farm near Simcoe, Ont., and many contracts behind him for ridding airports like New York's JFK and city factories of unwanted birds. He tries to do it humanely, just as the new Chatham-Kent mayor, Diane Gagner, and her council (elected in 2001) proclaimed it had to be done.

First he scouted the problem and saw those crows massing in the field. He knew then that the flocks had reached astronomical sizes and were coming into town from all sides. Unleashing a bag of tricks that included his owls, fearsome falcons, hawks (which will occasionally kill) and a bald eagle, he began at the centre of the city and pushed the crows out, moving in ever-increasing circles until he was well into the country. The crows, of course, deciphered his tactics. So he mixed things up. Some days he used distress calls. Other times he just showed the crows things: he hung their dead colleagues on a rotating propeller-like device for observation, swung dead crows in the air or sent his

falcons skyward to attack lures on kites. Crows watched these exhibitions and decided to leave. Then they'd come back.

Watermann worked at it every day, all day. From late October through December 2000, he matched wits with his brainy foes. "The crows figure it out," he notes. "It's psychological warfare." But by the new year, he had reduced the population by 99 per cent. He returned to Chatham last year and kept the enemy at bay. This winter, he'll return again, to keep the crows on the move.

Down in Auburn, Steve Johnson persuaded officials to take a different approach. Welcome the birds, he told them. And they have. He set up a website called Save the Crows and told people to come to Auburn and view these marvellous creatures. Today he receives e-mail messages from all over North America, offering amazing tales of crow behaviour and observations of other city roosts. Johnson and McGowan believe that the crows that are chased out of Chatham simply go somewhere else. Recent reports indicate a rise in crow numbers in the biggest city in Chatham's neck of the woods: London, Ont., population 425,000.

But regardless of where the crows go, or whether you welcome them or scare them off, the phenomenon remains. We know the numbers involved, we think we know why it is happening, but do we know what it means?

Johnson unintentionally provides a clue when he speaks of the West Nile virus. Scientists believe it began on the western side of the Nile many years ago and spread to Russia, then Israel and eventually came to New York. Although it is often found in dead crows and other birds, it is carried across continents and oceans and to human beings by mosquitoes. And while a West Nile virus mosquito bite isn't apt to seriously harm a human being (it kills fewer of us than an ordinary flu), it is lethal to crows. A virulent carrier of a plague, a Typhoid Mary, is a creature that can infect others with a disease and remain alive to infect more. Crows, however, are swiftly devastated by West Nile. It may soon replace owls as their greatest predator. Crows

are merely showing us this new disease. They are, as Johnson says, an "indicator."

There's the word. Indicator. What are the crows that flew in massive numbers out of the tree-stripped fields of Kent County into Chatham, or those that roost in the ancient burial grounds atop Auburn, telling us? What are these remarkable birds that "like what we've done with North America" indicating?

They have figured something out. And it's this: our world is different these days, unnaturally different, warmer, more populated; our waste litters our habitat; our cities glow in the darkness like security-sealed landing sites; our tallest trees line our streets, not our countryside. McGowan will tell you it is wonderful that nature is coming so close to us now, even in these large numbers, that monster crow roosts may be a good sign, a return to the paradisaical days when passenger pigeons filled the skies. But below them, those pigeons saw an unspoiled world entirely unlike ours.

"I think it is a cumulative effect of a lot of changes that the human element is having on the landscape," says Allen Woodliffe, as he gets down to the crux of what the crows are up to. Most scientists who talk about this aberration make reference to global warming, human garbage or the destruction of trees. "We've created conditions," says Woodliffe, "and now we're paying the price." We need to be wary of crows, but for what they are telling us, not for what they are.

In one unnerving scene in *The Birds*, crows join the aerial attack on Bodega Bay, swarming down as if bringing a terrible message. Citizens cower in a restaurant as mayhem reigns outdoors. "Why are they doing this?" screams one woman, staring straight into the camera. It seems a good question to ask, calmly and intelligently, in the winter of 2002. For as you read this, the crows are returning, in numbers that darken the sky. ■

To comment, write to elmstreet@m-v-p.com.
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