

# The View From Heifer Hill, February 2021

## Looking for Trouble



In 1975, Middletown Rhode Island was beset by a wave of mail vandalism. Mailboxes were opened and their contents scattered on the ground, with some mail mangled and some missing. This seems the sort of crime that would have faded from memory long ago, except that the perpetrator turned out to be a crow. The tale was told to me by Deb Smith, a gifted educator who worked at BEEC for many years. Some of her formative nature experiences took place at the Norman Bird Sanctuary where Poe, the postal criminal, had been raised. Sanctuary staff had released Poe far away and were surprised that he had returned to his childhood haunts. They were not surprised to find he was causing mischief because, well, he was a crow.

My interest in crows was first piqued by a David Quammen essay, "Has Success Spoiled the Crow?" He argues that these bright birds have such an easy time meeting their needs that they have the spare time and the inclination to cause trouble. It is an amusing article, and he makes an interesting case. As final evidence, he describes "anting," an activity of many birds, but especially indulged in by crows. While anting, crows bathe in ant nests and rub beakfuls of ants on their

feathers. There is evidence that the formic acid released by the ants conditions feathers and deters parasites. Some researchers think this activity simply feels good and induces a state of ecstasy. One likens it to our use of drugs. "You know the pattern," writes Quammen, "High intelligence, large promise. Early success without great effort. Then a certain loss of purposefulness. Manifestations of detachment and cruel humor. Boredom. Finally, the dangerous spiral into drug abuse."

Do they really have an easier time meeting their needs than other birds? I find this hard to believe this time of year, but that is partly because of an illusion created by their roosts, nightly gatherings of hundreds to thousands of crows. Surely the crow population must be enormous! But, crows may fly as far as 50 miles from their feeding site to the sleeping roost. These winter roosts include year-round residents as well as crows that have migrated south for the winter. At a well-known roost in Lawrence, MA, over 10,000 crows gather every night in mid-winter and have become a local attraction.

Winter crow roosts are one of the great natural spectacles of our area. Each evening, crows begin

streaming toward the roost, their flocks growing as they get closer. As they near their destination, they pause in rowdy staging areas. As darkness falls, they make their final flight to the roost proper, where the noise and activity peak. When darkness falls, the crows settle into silence for the night.

Over the past forty years, crows have gradually shifted their roost locations to urban areas. Scientists think they do so to avoid predators and to take advantage of slightly warmer temperatures. As for why they gather at all, the answers are similar— safety in numbers and warmer tempera-

tures. Scientists speculate that they also collect information on food sources, enjoy the camaraderie, and try to impress potential mates.

On Saturday, February 13, BEEC and Southeastern Vermont Audubon are organizing a crow roost quest. Participants will watch from overlooks throughout the region. We hope to follow the crows from the hinterlands to their staging areas, and ultimately to their roost. If this works, we will converge at the roost as the crows are swirling, landing, showing off, sharing the news of the day, oh, and probably plotting mischief.

