

BRAINY BIRDS

By Cynthia Berger

What's the world's smartest bird? Most scientists say it's the common raven. One sign of ravens' brain power is their adaptability. That means that they can change their behavior to solve new problems.

For example, if they can't find one kind of favorite food, they learn to eat something else. In fact, they eat almost any food they can get their beaks on. Their foods include small animals, fruit, seeds, eggs, garbage, and dead meat. And because they eat so many different foods, they can live in lots of different places around the world: deserts, mountains, forests, cities, and even the cold Arctic.

The size of a raven's brain may help explain why the bird is so smart. It has a large brain compared to its body size. For example, a chicken weighs twice as much as a raven. But its brain is only one fifth as heavy as the raven's brain.

Quork-quork-quork! Oo-oo. Rap-rap-rap. Kek-kek-kek. Honk honk! Ravens make lots of different sounds. Scientists have counted as many as 80 different sounds. Ravens can copy sounds too. One raven learned to imitate all the dogs in a neighborhood. They can also imitate other kinds of birds, the sound of falling water, human speech, motorcycles, and even the ringing of the bell on an ice cream truck. Copying sounds may not be a sign of smarts, but it sure makes ravens interesting to have around!

Ravens play more than most other birds, and this may be a sign of intelligence. They seem to have tons of fun just flying around. They especially like to roll over in the air. They also fly in rollercoaster patterns and in swooping loop-the-loops.

Ravens like to swing, but they don't need a swing set to do it. They lean backward off a perch and swing upside down by their feet just for the fun of it. They even swing by their beaks from branches!

Ravens often save food in the top of a rotting stump, in a clump of tall grass, or in a hole dug in dirt or snow. With their excellent memories, they have no trouble finding their meals later on. What's more, ravens watch where other ravens hide food—and then they steal it.

Sometimes a raven can be too clever. A scientist named Konrad Lorenz kept a raven named Roah to study it. One day; Roah picked up some wet laundry that had fallen off Dr. Lorenz's clothesline. The scientist rewarded the helpful bird with food. Big mistake. After that, Roah showered the scientist with wet laundry from all the neighborhood clotheslines! A raven may look plain—but oh, what a brain!

