

Chihuahuan Raven

BY TERRY B. JOHNSON • ILLUSTRATION BY ZACKERY ZDINAK

SCIENTIFIC NAME: *Corvus cryptoleucus*. The genus (*Corvus*) is Latin for raven. The specific epithet stems from the Latin for hidden (*crypto*) and white (*leucus*), a reference to the neck and upper breast feathers, which are white rather than gray or grayish at the base. Previously known as the white-necked raven.

DESCRIPTION: A relatively large, black bird—the white neck cannot be seen easily, except in the hand. Total length 19-20 inches from tip of heavy bill to tip of wedge-shaped tail. The bill and tail shapes, and longer wings, help distinguish this species from the American crow (thinner bill, fan-shaped tail), but not the common raven. The Chihuahuan's throat feathers are not as shaggy as those of the slightly larger common raven, and its call is somewhat higher in pitch. Distinguishing among crows and ravens in the field is not easy, unless the observer is experienced, or willing to bluff. Behavioral clue: Ravens soar much more than crows.

DISTRIBUTION: This species summers as far north as the southwestern Great Plains, but occurs year-round from southern Arizona to West Texas and south through Mexico. In Arizona, it is not unknown in the central counties, but occurs mainly in the southeastern corner from central Tohono O'odham Tribal lands easterly to Safford, and to the New Mexico and Mexico borders.

HABITAT: Chihuahuan ravens are most common where soaptree yuccas, cacti, and shrubby-mesquites occur in open plains and arid, scrubby desert grasslands. They are largely replaced by common ravens in lower elevation deserts and especially in the mountains.

BIOLOGY: In Arizona, Chihuahuan ravens nest in May-July. Females do most (perhaps all) of the nest construction. Their solitary nests are typically 4 to 40 feet high in trees (e.g., mesquite and soaptree), or on power pole cross beams, windmills, and billboard frames. The three to seven ovate eggs are pale to grayish green, with one clutch per season. Both adults incubate and care for the young. The eggs hatch at 21 days. The young fledge about 28 days later, as summer rains unleash a flood of grasshoppers and other arthropods.

Like most members of the crow family, the Chihuahuan raven is omnivorous and opportunistic. Invertebrates, plant matter, and ripe, road-killed vertebrate animals are fed upon with equal gusto. Chihuahuans are often seen in pre-daylight hours, patrolling roads for road-killed animals. Orchards and crops are frequented in season, much to the dismay of the owners.

Typically rather solitary, Chihuahuan ravens sometimes occur

in large flocks during fall and winter. In winter, the mesquite forests around Willcox once harbored roosting flocks of thousands. The birds ranged across Cochise County each day, only to return at night. In the latter 1900s, the roosts dwindled as the mesquites were cut. The wintering birds seem less abundant now, but may only be more scattered among the region's burgeoning orchards (pecan, pistachio, etc.).

STATUS: The Chihuahuan raven is not threatened or endangered. Very common throughout its normal range, it is protected by various federal migratory bird treaties and laws, and by state law in Arizona. Due to the federal restrictions, there is no open season for hunting this species in Arizona.

MANAGEMENT NEEDS: Humans need not do anything to help this species. Like the wily coyote, the Chihuahuan raven seems destined to prosper, with or without our help. Some additional raven management could, however, benefit other species. Under current federal law, property owners suffering crop losses to ravens can obtain a federal depredation permit to take offending birds, but this has not proven effective. So, they more typically request state "special local needs permits" to control the birds by use of lethal chemicals, which can kill non-target wildlife. A shotgun-only season in areas of depredation might enable sport harvest to substitute for chemical control, with more certainty that only ravens would be affected. 🦅

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Terry B. Johnson, Chief, Nongame and Endangered Wildlife Program, writes about birds that he watched long ago but now sees only in his daydreams as he sits through meeting after meeting after meeting.

