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## CROW ON A SPREADER

How a common, garden-variety crow became a part of the family



Crow, shiny and black, perched on Bruce's bright red Forest Warden shirt made for a striking picture.

**W**e called him "Crow." My brother Bruce took him from a nest on Sackville Island at the head of Thompson Sound with a little help from our mother who is a serious birder and knows her way around a rookery. The theft really went against Mom's birdwatching ethics, but my 10-year-old brother wanted a pet crow very badly, and he was a natural with animals.

We kept Crow in a large birdcage and fed him regularly until he got all of his feathers, then he was free to come and go as he pleased. The cage up on the dash by the helm station was his sanctuary, and each evening at dusk he'd fly back and we'd let him in and he'd swagger into his cage. We were tied up to a barge alongside the island then, living aboard the *Northern Spring*, a 60-foot ketch our dad had built. Dad worked as a welder in the logging camp and we used our whaler with a two-horsepower Seagull outboard to run

back and forth to camp.

Since Bruce was the primary caregiver of Crow and the only one of us who had been imprinted onto the bird, my brother was followed everywhere. Crow would spot him out in the skiff and swoop down for a landing on Bruce's shoulder, perching there like a little sentry all the way over to camp. He got used to camp quickly and had a lot of fun with people. He'd fly up behind some unsuspecting person walking from the dock to camp, whack them on the head with his feet, and then careen off. I was included on his hit list, and it always seemed to happen on a rainy day when I had my rain jacket hood up—I never saw it coming. But loving birds the way I do, I felt privileged to have been chosen for his game.

We moved the boat over to the camp eventually and tied to the stiff-leg there, a couple of hundred feet from the main dock where the loggers fished for salmon in the evenings. I don't know how it

started, but someone began to play on the fact that crows are attracted to shiny objects, and Crow became a purveyor of coins. We would see him at the dock strutting around the loggers' legs and tackle boxes, often reaching in and grabbing the silver spoon lures, then someone would hold their hand out to him and he'd fly back to the boat with a nice shiny coin in his beak. He'd often fly in dimes, nickels and quarters through the open hatch, landing on the table in the main saloon and dropping his treasure. Other times he'd cache his loot up in the mainsail cover. He got a name around camp for his little tricks, and we were fondly accused of a weird kind of scam: Crow's cute cleverness made people give him money and we were the ones sending him for it. In fact, Dad used to say, "He doesn't like copper, just give him silver."

A couple of times a year, we would head to Vancouver or Victoria to replenish supplies, or to put the boat on the ways or just have a holiday. Crow would come with us. He would fly from boat to land, back and forth, for the entire trip, returning to the spreaders if we weren't under sail, landing on a hatch cover if we were. He also liked to land on my brothers' outstretched arms. It was a striking picture—Crow, shiny and black, perched on Bruce or David's bright red Forest Warden shirts. Once when we were tied up in Victoria's Inner Harbour, some of the dock-walkers noticed that the crow hanging around our boat was tame, so we chatted with them, and they ended up tossing coins onto the deck just to watch Crow hide his gifts in the sail covers. Sometimes he flew up onto the spreaders and stashed the coins there and we'd be

# “ SOMEONE WOULD HOLD THEIR HAND OUT TO HIM AND HE'D FLY BACK TO THE BOAT WITH A NICE SHINY COIN IN HIS BEAK. ”

showered with them as soon as the boat rocked from another boat's wash.

On one of our trips to Vancouver, we were motoring along Blind Channel and Crow flew from the boat toward a large group of his own kind flocking near the shore. After we'd gone about two miles without him, my brother became upset and started to cry. "Dad! We gotta turn around!" But we were trying to make the tide at Greene Point Rapids, and Dad pointed out that Crow may have decided to join other crows and live his natural life—and of course, we'd always known this day would come. Bruce was trying to hold back the crying and went to sit at the stern where he stared into the distance and refused to move. A little while went by and we all heard him holler, "I see a black dot!" We figured his eyes had gone funny because he'd been staring so hard. It only took a few minutes though and the black speck turned into flapping wings and there was Crow, flying hard to catch up.

Crow often joined us for breakfast, and his favourite meal was oatmeal porridge. He'd fill his crop so full that the porridge would ooze out the sides of his beak. He ate greedily like this, especially when we fed him outside on the hatch cover, as opposed to when we fed him on the table in the main saloon, and we figured it might have been due to other crows being around. And we discovered that Crow was a hoarder of food when we took off the sail covers one day and chunks of congealed porridge splattered out onto the deck.

His lunchtime favourite was hard boiled eggs, and this came in handy when he stole my brother Doug's space pen from the table. It was "The Pen Used by the Astronauts" and it was nitro-charged, brass checker-plated, quite expensive and my brother's most cherished birthday present. Crow flew to

the bow with the pen, landed gracefully and strutted out to the very end of the bowsprit while my brother looked on, horrified as his astronaut pen wobbled up and down in the bird's beak. But Crow couldn't resist pieces of egg (even if it did seem a little cannibalistic to us), so he sauntered over to our outstretched hands, dropped the pen onto the deck and snatched up our offerings.

Other thefts by Crow included Dad's 3/8" combo wrench that had been left sitting out by the engine cover and ended up being dropped from the bowsprit into the bay while Dad was trying to coax Crow over to him; Dad probably hadn't had any hard boiled eggs. There were also collections of screws and other small wrenches stolen from the shop that tumbled out of the sail covers on a number of occasions.

We had Crow about two years before it was time to leave Thompson Sound. Dad had had enough welding, so we decided to head north, just to look around. My brother's friend, Leon Paul, lived at camp with his family in a float house over in Sunny Bay and he had become a good friend to Crow, so we gave the bird to him. He promised to keep Crow inside when we headed out of Thompson Sound for the last time; then, when the *Northern Spring* was out of sight, he'd let him go. We figured Crow would be best off left in his place of origin.

Years later my family bumped into Leon Paul at the government dock in Campbell River, and he said that Crow had stayed with him for about a year after we were gone, then he just took off one day and never came back. We figured it had finally been time for Crow to return to his own kind, maybe to mate and join a rookery, or maybe to return to Sackville Island. Crow's clever ways had been a real pleasure for all of us, and he enriched our lives—now, 32 years later, we still hold him close in our hearts. ☘

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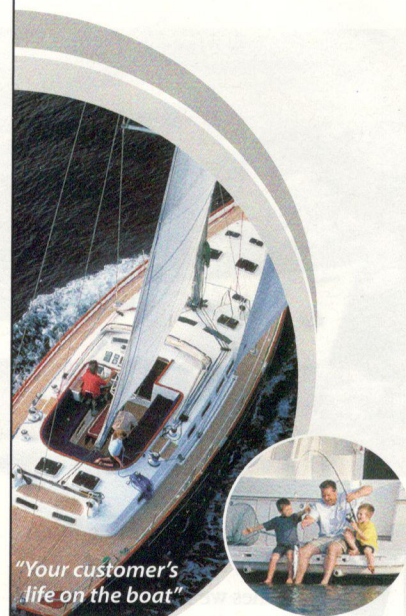
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