

Lawrence Winter Crow Roost Becomes Catalyst for Artistic Expression, Community Outreach, and Citizen Science

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All photos by the author.

It's a phenomenon that rivals a work of art: the winter crow roost in Lawrence, Massachusetts. Night after night thousands of crows fill the sky, seeking a resting place in the overnight communal roost. The Merrimack River, massive red-brick mill buildings, open parking lots, apartment building rooftop edges, utility poles, and wires form the background for the birds' nocturnal activities.

On a Sunday night in January 2019, the crows were far from alone. Members and friends of the Massachusetts Audubon Society had just been to visit the Essex Art Center, where they'd seen photography, videography, and art galleries celebrating the crows. Then they traveled a short distance to an industrial park on the west side of the Bashara Boathouse adjacent to the Merrimack River.

Everyone was bundled up in jackets and hats, but the winter chill was soon forgotten as the vast number of crows circling overhead dazzled this group of experienced birders.

That evening was one of many that took place last winter as part of a collaboration in Lawrence that included artists, educators, and birding and conservation groups. The Boys and Girls Club of Lawrence brought in artists and writers to help young people learn about the crows and express that knowledge creatively. Groundwork Lawrence, an organization that focuses on environmental and community issues, used the crow roost as part of its Green Team youth program. The observations and data collected by members of the many birding clubs and conservation groups attracted to the roost have laid the foundation for a citizen science effort.

And it all started with the crows.

While by no means ubiquitous, winter crow roosts take place in urban environments throughout the country. The winter roost in Lawrence typically spans October through early April. The number of birds is at first small but by the end of the season can grow to more than 25,000. The roost is made up of American Crows (*Corvus brachyrhynchos*) and Fish Crows (*Corvus ossifragus*). A smaller number of the American Crows are local residents and perhaps up to 80 percent are migrants from the north. The Fish Crows are almost all local birds. Just before sunset, they stream in from daytime foraging grounds up to 20 miles away and gather in smaller groupings, which may be hundreds or thousands, in locations referred to as staging areas. Then all the smaller groupings converge at the final roost to spend the night. The staging and roosting areas change often, making it difficult at times to project where the roost will be from night to night.

While many in the Lawrence community had witnessed these thousands of crows showing up in their neighborhood for years, most did not understand why. That all changed last winter when the winter crow roost in Lawrence became a catalyst for artistic expression, community outreach, and citizen science.

Three local birders, Dana Duxbury-Fox, Bob Fox, and I, came together two years ago to document the roost. Dana and Bob had been observing the roost for a few years, and I joined them during the fall of 2017 to observe, monitor, and photograph the behavior. Our group became known as The Crow Patrol.

At that point, we were just a group of birders doing what birders do. We spent many nights separately observing and documenting the crows' behavior. Bob used reliable and time-tested counting methodologies to determine the size and scope of the phenomenon. Dana posted on listservs for Massachusetts, New Hampshire, and Vermont. I posted detailed data and photos of the crows in action on eBird as well as on the blog (www.wintercrowroost.com). To date, the blog has had more than 4,000 individual visitors.

Then interest in the crows began to grow. Dana and Bob had already been in communication with Wayne Petersen, Director of Massachusetts Important Bird Area Program at Mass Audubon, who had been adding his insight to their efforts. As we posted our findings on birding sites and reached out to others we thought might be interested, word about the roost in Lawrence spread. Soon members of

birding clubs and conservation groups were joining us and observing the roost. We found ourselves conducting informal guided tours and talks. Academics and scientists joined in. Two colleges became interested in possible research opportunities.

With the increased interest in mind, and having witnessed the success of a crow-themed art show at The Studio Door, a San Diego art gallery, we realized the crow roost presented an opportunity to engage the Lawrence community and beyond in celebrating the crows. That's when we decided to reach out to the Essex Art Center, Boys and Girls Club of Lawrence, Merrimack River Watershed Council, and Groundwork Lawrence. The resulting programs and activities were greater than any of us could have predicted. "I think it is a wonderful example of how a common-place event can end up capturing such widespread interest," said Wayne, who helped to organize the Mass Audubon event.

The Arts and the Crows

Who would have guessed that crow behavior would generate enough interest to be the subject of an art exhibit in all three of a museum's galleries? And yet, that's what happened when the Essex Art Center dedicated its three exhibit areas to the crows over a two-month period, from January 11 through March 15, 2019. "All of us here at Essex Art Center had been watching these crows fly in for years," said Cathy McLaurin, the center's Executive Director. "We figured, if we were fascinated, others would be too."

The main room, the Chester F. Sidell Gallery, showcased crow photography. Experienced bird photographers provided 25 matted and framed prints for the exhibit and later for sale. Each photographer donated all revenue from framed-print sales back to the Essex Art Center. The second room, the Elizabeth A. Beland Gallery, showcased the extraordinary videography work of Dennis Hlynsky, artist and Professor and Department Head of the Film/Animation/Video Department at the Rhode Island School of Design. "Dennis manipulates video to see flight patterns on the wings," Cathy said. "They look like someone is drawing on the sky." He created videos specifically of the crow roost in Lawrence. The third gallery was given over to community members. The museum invited people of any age working in any discipline to contribute artwork with a crow theme.

"I don't think we had any sense of how popular the exhibit would be," Cathy said. "It brought in not only bird watchers, but also other people who said they had never been to the Essex Art Center before, but they had been watching the crows for years and were curious."

Various community organizations brought members and benefactors to the Essex Art Center for events similar to the one the Mass Audubon members attended. The visitors would start at the Essex Art Center, hear a talk about the crows from Dana, Bob or me, and then head out to the field for a guided tour of the crows streaming in, staging, and roosting. The Merrimack Valley Watershed Council, a local conservation group, held two events. One was with the Merrimack Valley Bird Club and Andover Village Improvement Society. The other was geared specifically toward families called Crows and Cocoa. "We ended up in the middle of these crowing birds, and people loved it," said Lara Mataac, a volunteer with the Council.

Young People Get Involved

The activities based out of the Essex Art Center were just the start. Groups working with young people developed programs using the crow roost as a base. The Boys and Girls Club of Lawrence brought in Lawrence Arts House, an expressive arts studio, and Andover Bread Loaf, which promotes literacy and educational revitalization through the lens of social justice, to collaborate on a five-week program for children in grades 2 through 5. The program included an art component and a writing component. “The great thing about the project was that it made the children aware of this birding spectacle they didn’t even know was happening in their city,” said Karen Kravchuk, Director of Education for the Boys and Girls Club of Lawrence.



Karen Kravchuk, Director of Education, extending warm welcome to students and families for the 2019 Family Bread Loaf Night at the Boys and Girls Club of Lawrence (Feb 28, 2019).

The students worked with staff members from Lawrence Arts House to create crow-themed art and with high school students who had been trained by Andover Bread Loaf to lead writing sessions. Far from being just a writing program, Andover Bread Loaf focuses on the importance of community. Lou Bernieri, Director of the program, said it was valuable for the young students to see the concept of community played out in the world of the crows. “Crows are smart, social, and family oriented,” he said. “These birds have characteristics that are very human.”

At the end of the program, the Boys and Girls Club hosted a family night during which the younger students displayed their artwork and read what they wrote to a gathering of family and friends.

Groundwork Lawrence's Green Team program helps students learn about and lead local environmental and conservation initiatives, conduct research, raise awareness, and partake in hands-on projects. Their office happens to be right across from the Duck Bridge in Lawrence, a regular roosting site. Matt Morin, Education Program Manager for Groundwork Lawrence, had hoped to bring the students to one of the shows at the Essex Art Center. "I'm a bit of a photographer and had gone out a couple of nights on my own," Matt said. "I was near the Bashara Boathouse, and the swirl of birds around me was like a water spout. It was awe-inspiring."

Unfortunately, when Matt contacted us, the shows were all booked. As this was a great opportunity to get conservation-minded high-school students involved, I arranged a private tour of the art exhibit for them, gave a talk, and helped to coordinate a guided tour at the Bashara Boathouse so the young people could observe the crows staging and roosting along the Merrimack River. Groundwork Lawrence is now working on a pilot project curriculum regarding the crows, which is described in the Moving Forward section below.

Foundation for Citizen Science

One of the most exciting parts of this experience has been the foundation we've created for a citizen science effort. We now have two years of detailed data and documentation gathered by Dana, Bob, and me. With the interest of birding clubs and conservation groups drawn to the roost over the last two years, we have increased the amount of data collected even further. This information will be used by the academic researchers and avian biologists who don't have time to sit in the field.

We now hope to bring in a more disciplined approach. Dana is helping to organize a research study with Andrew Vitz, Ph.D., State Ornithologist for MassWildlife, and Becky Harris, Ph.D. of Tufts University, as well as volunteers. The study will explore migration timing and patterns along with winter roost behavior, including flight patterns and distances to and from daytime foraging grounds.

We are also starting a local podcast to interview crow experts and we will archive the stories. Podcasting provides yet another great way to be connected to the birding world and to learn from others.

Moving Forward

Last year provided an excellent start to what we hope will be a growing interest in the crow roost in Lawrence. The Essex Art Center plans to build on the subject of crows to produce an exhibition that frames the crows in a larger conversation about the environment, and they will also be expanding the number of photographers exhibiting their work. The Boys and Girls Club will again work with Lawrence Arts House and Andover Bread Loaf. We plan to work even more closely with Merrimack River Watershed Council, Merrimack Valley Bird Club, Andover Village Improvement Society, and other conservation and environmental groups and bird clubs.

This year, we are developing a new collaboration with Hunt's Photo and Video, a photographic, video, and digital-imaging business in Melrose, Massachusetts, that also runs educational programs and guided photography walks. Their walks will provide hands-on instruction on how to photograph in a city location, under dark lighting conditions, with black crows as the target.

Groundwork Lawrence is developing a STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Math) curriculum for a pilot program with high school students in their Green Team program. The curriculum focuses on training students how to observe and document trends and patterns around a winter crow roost. The students will take a three-hour, online course to learn how to use eBird, and The Crow Patrol will work with them to help them use it. Other components of the program include a Cornell Lab of Ornithology online course, conference calls with crow experts, eight weeks of field work, demonstrations on drone use, and the use of equipment to record and document bird calls.

“Groundwork is proud to cultivate the next generation of environmental leaders through our Green Team and are thrilled with the opportunity to collaborate with Craig and his rich, multi-faceted work with winter crows,” said Heather McMann, Executive Director of Groundwork Lawrence. “Our Green Team STEM program centered on the crows native to the area is another great example of how we can teach students to be excited about the natural world right here in Lawrence. The city has a multitude of beautiful natural resources and this partnership is a wonderful way to highlight that with our youth.”

This year there will be additional locations for talks and displays. One location will be the Lawrence Heritage State Park, whose Visitor’s Center is a restored 1840s boarding house where exhibits tell the stories of Lawrence’s mill workers and immigrant populations.

We are also connecting with community-minded local businesses. The Spicket River Brewery, which has taken an active role in the cleaning of local rivers and trails and also provides space to local artists, will be hosting events, including an open mic night. The company is even working on a new beer label for a crow-themed brew. El Taller Cafe and Book Store, which is committed to literacy and provides exhibit space for artworks, will also be hosting a crow-themed art show in February 2020.

There will be a live demonstration by the Center for Wildlife, an organization based in Southern Maine, whose mission is educating community about wildlife ecology, human impacts on wildlife, and critical ecosystems and stewardship. The group travels with injured birds, known as Ambassadors, who cannot be returned to the wild. It will begin with a Welcome Back Celebration in November.

In the end, all of this activity has been about a deeper sense of connection. A common, often misunderstood bird has served to join us, not only to nature, but also to one another. In a desire to better understand the crow, the Lawrence community has created art, engaged young people in a new experience, and gathered as community in celebrations that even a New England winter night can’t cool. And it has brought us to the realization that we, and the creatures we share our world with, have more in common than we ever thought.

Craig B. Gibson is a bird conservation photographer who has photographed birds from Alaska to Antarctica. His current focus is on everything related to the Winter Crow Roost. Craig’s crow photos and articles have appeared in the Essex Art Center exhibition; Bird Observer; Mass Audubon publications; the Eagle Tribune newspaper; Cornell Lab’s Bird Academy online course “The Hidden Life of the American Crow”; Muse Magazine, a quarterly publication for students about science, nature, and history; Massachusetts Wildlife Magazine; and a new addition to the Peterson’s Guide series that focuses on bird behavior. He is one of the founders of The Crow Patrol.