

# Fish Crows at Saylorville Reservoir

*Stephen J. Dinsmore*

On 12 August 2018 I was birding at the small pond by the boat ramp at Sandpiper Beach when I heard a very nasal crow calling nearby that I immediately recognized as a Fish Crow. At 8:47 a.m. two crows flew in from the north and perched in one of the dead trees near the pond. They remained there for approximately 20 minutes, calling frequently, before flying west towards the beach. Bery Engebretsen arrived shortly after me and was able to confirm the identification. I searched for, but did not relocate, the birds on several subsequent trips before finally finding them again on 9 and 15 September. All sightings were around the pond and large parking area near the beach. Based on their behavior it seems likely that this was a pair of adult Fish Crows, although I saw no evidence of breeding.

The size, shape, glossy black coloration, and repeated “cah” calls identified the birds as crows. Most of the time they were alone, although on a couple of occasions I saw and heard American Crows nearby. The Fish Crows were distinctly smaller and more compact than the American Crows, but were otherwise similar in structure (Figure 1). The calls were mostly single-note, nasal “cah” calls although on a couple of occasions I heard the more typical double “cah-ah” call. I also examined the wing formula, which differs markedly from that of



Figure 1. Fish Crow, Saylorville Res, Polk, 12 Aug 2018. Photograph by Stephen J. Dinsmore, Ames, IA.

an American Crow. This was a little hard to assess because both birds were in active molt, although photos confirm that the tenth primary (p10) was the shortest primary, p7 and p8 were the longest, and p9 was just lightly longer than p5. On September visits the advanced state of primary molt was evident by their brown coloration and the fact that several primary tips were broken, and indeed a couple of inner primaries appeared to be missing (Figure 2). The flight feather molt for Fish Crow is in August to October while the same molt for American Crow is typically completed by July (McGowan 2001). The nasal calls, wing formula, and molt timing are diagnostic for Fish Crow and eliminate the similar American Crow. I made several recordings of the calls on each visit. To my knowledge the birds were not seen after 15 September.

This is approximately the 7th record of a Fish Crow for Iowa. There have been

two previous records from Saylorville Reservoir, single birds on 20 May 2014 at Oak Grove Beach (*Iowa Bird Life* 84:114; 4th state record) and 2–9 April 2017 at Cherry Glen Recreation Area (John A. Bissell, m. ob.; 6th state record).



Figure 2. Fish Crow, Saylorville Res, Polk, 9 Sep 2018. Photograph by Stephen J. Dinsmore, Ames, IA.

#### LITERATURE CITED

McGowan, K. J. 2001. Fish Crow (*Corvus ossifragus*), version 2.0. In *The Birds of North America* (A. F. Poole and F. B. Gill, Eds). Cornell Lab of Ornithology, Ithaca, NY, USA. <https://doi.org/10.2173/bna.589>.

1906 Leopold Drive, Ames, IA 50010 (cootjr@iastate.edu)