



Do scarecrows scare crows?

In honor of the Scarecrow Festival in Cambria, San Simeon and Harmony, I pondered the deep ecological question, “Do scarecrows really scare crows?”

The answer: Not really.

Scarecrows work quite well on some species of birds. Tests with scarecrows around small ponds reported a significant decrease in visits to those ponds by ducks.

The crow is smarter than your average duck. In fact, crows are some of the smartest birds in the avian world. They belong to the bird family Corvidae, sometimes referred to as the corvids. This large family includes crows, ravens, rooks, jackdaws, jays, magpies, and nutcrackers.

Crows are grassland walkers, systematically working their way through a field, seeking and picking up insects (including insects that can harm crops) and small animals such as lizards and frogs. They will also eat the eggs and chicks of other birds.

Crows earned their role as pest birds because they can decimate a field crop by eating freshly scattered seeds, uprooting sprouted corn, picking ripe grapes from the vine, and pecking away at vegetables and grains before the harvest.

Crows have adapted well to the rural and urban human landscape. They are masters at depleting bird feeders, raiding garbage cans, and stealing chips from unsuspecting park visitors who leave their picnics unattended.

Crows are social, forming huge flocks in the thousands. They will gang up and chase away hawks, owls and other large birds. All together, they can make quite a racket. When a bird is found dead, crows and other corvids will gather and caw at the dead bird’s body. This social behavior may be the source of the phrase, “A murder of crows.” It certainly does sound like it!

The traditional scarecrow is a decoy made in the shape of a human. It is dressed in old clothes and placed in an open field to discourage crows, blackbirds and starlings from feeding on seeds and sprouting crops. The loose clothing flaps in the breeze, giving the illusion of a real, moving person.

Just as crows occur in areas throughout the world, so do scarecrows, where they are known by different names. In England, scarecrows are referred to as hay-men or mommets. In Scotland, a scarecrow is called a tattie bogle. In Japanese legend, a scarecrow known as Kuebiko appears as a deity who cannot walk, yet knows everything about the world. Nathaniel Hawthorne’s 17th century short story, *Feathertop*, is about a scarecrow created and brought to life by a witch.

Stationary scarecrows may keep the crows away for a short period of time, but they quickly become used to them. Moving scarecrows around every few days does help, but this can be labor intensive.

Modern scarecrows use technology to keep the birds away. Shiny metallic ribbons, plastic netting, noise guns and laser lights are effective.

Whether you need to scare the crows away, or are just in the mood for some local whimsy, be sure to enjoy the creative muses running rampant in our towns through the end of October.

