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Raven Haven

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"BELAY on!" resounded the command from below. Planting my boots firmly and grasping the rope with both hands I yelled, "Belay on!" Charles Dachelet, hanging by rope part way down a vertical cliff, swung over a ledge for a better view.

"Hey! There are only two here. No vacancies either; the nest is packed."

This was all the big black silhouette circling overhead could stand. A steep dive and quick shallow wing beats brought the screaming bird within a few feet of Charles. Though in no danger, Charles ducked reflexively. Ravens are usually shy, especially when humans are near their nest. This was certainly unusual behavior worth capturing on film, but with both hands holding the rope, I had no chance. We have always tried to work

at nest sites as fast as was safely possible to avoid excessive disturbance to the adult ravens. It was obvious that mama raven was upset and that it was high time for us to leave. The young do not seem to mind an occasional visit from strange beasts such as ourselves.

"O.K., Chuck. One quick nest photo and let's get out of here."

"Got it. Belay off."

Charles rappelled smoothly down the face of the cliff and landed in an unwelcome jungle of rhododendron. If you have ever tried it, you know there is no graceful way to get out of a rhododendron thicket. As I quickly coiled the rope for a fast exit, I wondered if there would be two young ravens flying around the George Washington National Forest next fall imitating the colorful phrases that were coming from the base of the cliff.

Sweating from the warm April sun and our exertions, we met farther down the ridge at a safe distance from the nest. Forty-one days before, on a cold day in early March, we had found the nest which then contained five mottled blue eggs grouped in the security of the warm nest lining. Now we could not tell what had happened to three of the eggs but one thing was clear—there was just enough room on the ledge for the two big nestlings. They were now a good three weeks old, and in another two weeks the young ravens would be soaring over the vastness of Virginia's mountains.

From late February to the end of April we had spent numerous hours searching cliffs with powerful telescopes and had climbed and hiked over miles of steep mountain sides where few trails exist. This nest was one of the eight active raven nests we had located on our 125-square-mile study area. Five hundred hours of searching had failed to reveal any other active nests; however, additional work this spring will verify our results. Our efforts, part of the Forest Service's

These nestlings will grow to be the world's largest "songbirds."





Mountaineering skills are often needed to examine nests at close range.

nongame wildlife research program, were directed at learning more about the ecological requirements of this little-studied species. We were especially interested in the types of cliffs ravens require for nesting, how close they will nest to another raven nest, and how much human disturbance they can tolerate.

The raven is found in many parts of the Northern Hemisphere, but its range is only a portion of what it used to be. By and large it has survived in areas remote from humans. In North America the raven was driven from the plains with the passing of the buffalo in the 1870's. The great bird at one time nested along the east coast as far south as North Carolina, but was forced to retreat and has made a successful stand in the Southern Appalachians. Even so, in this century the raven has been driven from the mountains of Alabama and Ken-

tucky. The bird is now found in the mountains from north Georgia to northern Pennsylvania. Based on our research, we tentatively estimate that there may be approximately 3000 breeding pairs of ravens in the Southern Appalachians. Perhaps a third of these are in Virginia.

Is this a lot of ravens? It is difficult to tell and depends upon your viewpoint. Certainly part of the raven's appeal stems from its rarity and the accent it gives to the wild country that it calls home. The ultimate question is, "Can the raven maintain a healthy population in the future as man demands more and more from the Southern Appalachians?" Only time will tell. Why has Virginia remained a haven for the raven, while the species has declined in other areas?

The disappearance of ravens from much of their former range indicates that they are ecologically a sensitive species. Virginia has already lost two important cliff-nesting species—the golden eagle and the peregrine falcon. The raven is doing its part to remain a Virginian. With a better understanding of its ecology, perhaps we can give it a hand if one is ever needed.

Ravens frequently use the same cliffs for nesting year after year, and a large amount of nest material sometimes collects at the base.

