

Next were a pair of magpies who were equally charming and clever but unfortunately too brave for their own good. They fearlessly challenged the dogs for their food and one day the springer spaniel snapped and got the two of them. It was time for the Raven, and again my friend also acquired one. They were the match of the dogs and would swoop down and chase them from their dishes, but neighbours sent a deputation that they were worried about small children being carried off after a small cat went missing.

I was beginning to have second thoughts myself at this stage because they were just too damn clever and persistent. Every morning they would tap at my window with their big beaks just as dawn was taking a hold. I would open the window and they would fly into the bedroom and demand to be fed. Chopping up liver at that hour of the morning and dealing with the crap and noise was palling. One night I shifted bedroom from upstairs to down... and they knocked on that window the next morning.

We boxed them up and my father drove them into the Wicklow hills. They were back before he was. The following week my father went shooting down in Tipperary and he released them and this time they didn't come back! Any niggling suspicions about this were laid to rest the following year when the two of them turned up knocking on the window again. They kept their distance a little more than before and only stayed a week or so. They did this each year for some years to come and we guessed they must have mated and stayed together.

You might have thought that was the end of homing crows, but in a strange twist, my youngest son 4 years ago brought home a grey crow which had fallen out of the nest and had a broken leg and wing and, we suspect, banged his head as he has never seemed the full shilling. So ever since we have looked after him building his bigger and bigger aviary cages wherein he can flutter around and meet other birds (who flit through the netting). He can't perch and hobbles around but we

love him. He plays pull the stick and hide the ball and loves to have his beak stroked while he croaks in pleasure.

So I have a history with crows, and not all of it joyful. In the strange conflicting urges of youth I used to shoot birds with a pellet gun and then one day I shot a jackdaw and that was the end of the pellet gun. I broke it to bits in disgust. When older and living in Donegal I used to shoot birds for food with a shot gun. One day talking to the neighbouring farmer I was informed that he was poisoning the corn to feed to the crows because they were eating his potatoes. Canny John knew I would be horrified and offered if someone with a gun were to shoot a couple of them he would hang them on the fence to act as a warning to the others. I shot two for him though it must have taken me days as I kept missing and I was a good shot. I gave him the dead rooks and realised I would be asked again, so I gave him the gun as well and never shot another bird in my life.

Another illuminating moment concerns a chaffinch down at Robertsown Co Kildare. I used to put out food for him and he got to the stage of bring his fat offspring with him right into the boat to be fed, the baby who weighed more than him would take the food from him but not deign to pick up a crumb if it fell to its feet. I wondered what became of that fat spoilt baby, and where was the missus. Had she got more sense and flown the nest when she saw what was happening, or had she (more likely) gone of with another finch to rear another brood? Then one day while working on my son's boat I was suddenly aware of a persistent cheeping, and lo and behold there he was with chick in tandem shouting at me from the roof of the boat... he recognised me.

I could go on with other encounters with birds and the 'spiritual' sensation they evoke in me of communing with nature and the universe, but I will conclude with the most recent and the most stunning observation that has almost shaken me and I am someone who as you can see has had a lifetime's interest in birds.

My wife and I were walking the prom to the harbour in Bray as we do (I to feed my rook - see picture) and we noticed a formation of gulls hanging in the updraft where the wind hit the harbour wall and was deflected upwards. They were shrieking strangely and hovering in a double row with the back row higher than the front (roughly 2.0 clock from them) - and

that wasn't the only parallel to fighter pilots. At any moment one or more of the upper echelon would dive on the quarry beneath them. As quick, the lower bird would dive and try to jink out of the way (and almost always did so successfully) whereupon they would return to position only in most cases with the pursuer now taking the lower position. We were staggered to see a more or less structured game taking place, and then to add to the moment a grey crow who had been standing on the harbour wall flew up and took up position in the ranks. We were sure there would be murder, but no he joined in perfectly. He dived, he jinked with the best of them, and, to our surprise, he was as acrobatic as the gulls.

Watching this inter-species play was extraordinary. After a while the crow flew off to a nearby chimney and then after a few minutes three of the gulls peeled off and buzzed him, obviously inviting him back to the game. He came back and continued to hold his own. We left them still at it, by now being frozen and cursing the lack of a camera. I shouldn't have been that surprised at his ability having seen a grey crow dropping sticks in the air and then catching them in what I assume was a courtship display of fitness.

Indeed I mentioned this game to other humanists at one of our Sunday meetings and Roy Johnston made the point that games are not a waste of time but a honing of skills and when you think of it the skills they were honing were pretty fundamental to their kind. Another person pointed out that the abundance of food at the harbour (from people like me) means those birds have time and energy to spare. And indeed having such to spare is often put forward as one of the reasons humans developed mental capacity.

So where do I conclude this account of my spiritual relationship with birds? Well I have to say the feelings of communing with nature when relating to birds are getting stronger as the years go by and I am fortunate that my wife shares this development. It has reached the stage where an encounter with birds is the highlight of my week and we have them coming into our kitchen as I write. Hopefully others might follow with tales of their own spiritual moments, be it music, art, nature or whatever, and illustrate how rewarding life can be with its spiritual moments for humanists in this glorious, beautiful and yet deadly world. □