



FEATURE

The Secret Life of Urban Crows

...and why Seattle may be the Corvid Capital of the World.

By [James Ross Gardner](#) • 5/17/2017 at 11:00am • Published in the [June 2017](#) issue of *Seattle Met*

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Illustration by [Steven P Hughes](#)

On a blustery overcast morning this past April, Kaeli Swift walked across the campus of the University of Washington toting a weathered, purple-and-white plastic [shopping](#) bag. This bag, if found by some unsuspecting

student or grounds person, would almost certainly trigger a campuswide panic. Inside Swift had stowed a rubber mask of a grotesque, exaggerated male face—large ears, bulbous nose, silver-whiskered soul patch—a guise that would not look out of

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She tromped through the wet grass in calf-high [Sorel snow boots](#) and made her way to the university's Center for Urban Horticulture, where she's a teaching assistant for an undergraduate natural history class. Near the Dumpsters and trash cans parked behind the center, Swift found a perfect spot for what she was about to do: perform a ritual that, depending how you look at it, is a couple of years old or a couple million.

Swift, a PhD candidate, is a member of UW's nationally acclaimed Avian Conservation Lab. If you've heard or read a news story in the last decade about *Corvus brachyrhynchos*—aka, the American crow—and what science has to say about its confounding habits and aptitude, there's a good chance it was thanks to the work conducted by the lab, led by a man named John Marzluff. The UW professor and wildlife biologist is the author of numerous popular books on the subject. In 2008, Marzluff and his fellow researchers made national headlines when they tested a hypothesis—that crows recognize individual human faces—by donning Dick Cheney masks. That led to another revelation: Crows teach other crows to detest specific people (and sometimes attack them).

Today Swift, 30, would repeat an experiment that uncovered one of the team's more staggering revelations. And she conducted it with the ceremony of an undertaker.





Kaeli Swift employs taxidermic specimens to study how crows process the death of one of their own.

IMAGE: [MIKE KANE](#)

From the old shopping bag she unsheathed the dead crow and turned it in what little sunshine strained through the fibrous clouds. The black feathers sparkled in the light, and close inspection revealed iridescent blues and purples. She covered it back up with a tan cloth and, with the draped bird lying breast down on her two upturned palms, stepped gingerly onto a patch of grass. She tore the linen away and unveiled the corpse to the gray heavens.

There was nothing at first, just an empty sky. Then, a caw. A crow appeared on a nearby power line. Then another caw and another crow. Suddenly crows flew in from all [directions](#). Their plaintive entreaties soon combined into a chorus. New arrivals joined what quickly grew into a cacophonous dervish of black silhouettes swirling directly above Swift.

It was like sorcery. Conjuring dozens of birds from thin air by simply removing fabric from a body.

This, according to Swift, is what its like to attend a crow funeral—an instinctive ritual that evolved generations ago and was just discovered by humans; Swift coauthored an article on her findings in the journal *Animal Behaviour* in 2015. The gist: Upon spotting one of its dead, the flock attends to the fallen bird en masse with loud shrieking. Given enough time the throng will mob any predator it thinks is responsible, like say, a human in a Dick Cheney mask, or in a mask like the one Swift had in her bag (the lab affectionately refers to that be-soul-patched fellow as Joe).

Because she had decided to leave Joe out of today's repeat of her groundbreaking experiment, she had to take precautions. Early during this gathering tsunami of sound, once the crows became particularly agitated, Swift pulled the hood of her [rain jacket](#) over her face, lest the birds, days later, recognize that face—elfin features, sometimes sharpened with rectangular-framed eyeglasses, and bracketed by a cascade of brown curls.

It's no accident that Swift and the Avian Conservation Lab are based here. Seattle is unique among U.S. cities for what its human citizens have unwittingly fashioned over the past century or so, a habitat ideal for these ebon-winged aviators. It's also a city obsessed. Crows figure into local iconography, they occupy our art, and, last year, they were at the center of a \$200,000 lawsuit.

For now, up above, the birds Kaeli Swift had stirred into a squawking horde were just getting started. She gave one more tug on her jacket hood, pulling it down tight. It was going to be a wild ride.

“**WHEN I CAME TO SEATTLE**, it was pretty obvious that the corvid of the day here was the crow,” John Marzluff, the Avian Conservation Lab head, told me recently. He was hired away from Boise State by the University of Washington in 1997 to teach and to study corvids, the family to which crows belong. (Jays, ravens, and magpies are also corvids.) Marzluff narrowed his focus once he observed just how many American crows lived and thrived in the city. Seattle’s rapid growth and unique geography, essentially a forest squeezed between two bodies of water, are key to that large crow population. Forests aren’t ideal for crow life, but over the past century we’ve carved and opened up these areas for our suburbs and provided a constant food source—namely, abundant edible trash. We’ve created what Marzluff calls “a mecca for crows.”

What’s more, due to the constant exposure to urbanites, crows here are virtually unafraid of humans. “In the countryside there are hunting seasons on crows,” Marzluff says. And farmers harass and shoot them to protect their crops. In the city, we either ignore them, feed them, or turn them into icons (see the celebrated Italian restaurant Il Corvo in Pioneer Square and Capitol Hill’s Corvus and Co., which flaunts its crow-inspired name with crow-inspired art.) Either way, crows here are cued into our daily rhythms and feel safe among us.

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”

That’s certainly the case on the campus of the University of Washington, where up to 78,000 students, faculty, and staff spend their days. An early challenge for Marzluff, as he and his colleagues got the lab started, was capturing the campus fowl. (They’re not afraid of us, but that doesn’t mean they like being nabbed.) The team first tried a complicated makeshift trap involving a pizza box, leg nooses, and a weight. Later, and more successfully, they employed net guns to envelope the birds whole. As they apprehended each crow, the researchers placed a color-coded band on its feet, in order to tell the birds apart, and then set it free.

This opened a portal into crow life, permitting researchers access to what felt like another dimension, the crows’ dimension.

“We were watching to see what they eat,” Marzluff recalls, “and basically they will eat anything—and they will try everything.” The birds would, for example, loiter around garbage cans and wait for a squirrel to squirm into a can and pop back out with food. The crows would mob that squirrel and steal its [lunch](#). “I remember one time seeing them eat vomit off the side of a wall,” Marzluff says. “You just go, ‘Wow, really?’ But they’re very opportunistic and they make do with just about any scrap in the city you can imagine.”

He details the birds’ resourcefulness and ingenuity in a 2012 book he coauthored, *Gifts of the Crow: How Perception, Emotion, and Thought Allow Smart Birds to Behave Like Humans*. There we learn that, not only do birds recognize human faces and hold grudges for human misdeeds, they teach other birds to recognize

grudgeworthy mugs. Fledglings, for example, watch their parents mistreated, hear the cawing associated with it, and learn to despise that human in the same way.

On the other hand, Marzluff writes, crows show great appreciation for humans who treat them well. “Gifts left behind are intended to court or impress people important in a crow’s life.” These gifts have been known to include candy, keys, and coins.

ARTICLE CONTINUES AFTER ADVERTISEMENT

Marzluff couldn’t have known it when he first typed those words into his book manuscript, but they would soon animate what may be the most surprising, controversial human-crow interaction in the city’s history.



Seattle’s Avian Conservation Lab [uses](#) stuffed crows (left) and masks (right) to study a variety of crow behaviors, including threat aversion and facial recognition.

IMAGE: [MIKE KANE](#)

SEATTLEITES KNOW CROWS. We've seen them hop across a parking lot with an empty Dick's burger wrapper. We've awoken to curdling squawks outside our window. We've agreed that those squawks rank somewhere between a car alarm and the cries of the most spoiled and annoying child ever. Crows are all around us, from the moment we walk out the door, to work or to coffee, they caw or dive-bomb or flit in the periphery. We know crows. Don't we?

But what if I were to tell you that the crows you spy in your yard are almost always the same individual crows? That those birds—usually two, a male and a female known as a territorial pair—don't live there but fly in every day from 20 miles away? During the day urban crows rummage and build nests in a specific spot, in a specific neighborhood, then decamp for the evening to a massive, crowded roost outside the city—their own crow planet— and report back to the neighborhoods each morning. Like you, they commute to work.

That's right. The crows you see hopping around downtown, on Capitol Hill, and in surrounding neighborhoods roost in a restored wetland out in Bothell, northeast of Seattle. (Crows spotted in the southern parts of the city likely roost in Renton.) An estimated 12,000 wing into the Bothell wetland at dusk—their numbers visibly darkening the sky as they approach—and doze into the night.

At the first sliver of morning light on the eastern horizon, the treetop planet croaks to life. This mass of shrieking marauders lifts up and atomizes again into x-shaped silhouettes, soaring to their daily hangouts all over the region—to the cities of Edmonds and Everett and Seattle.

The Seattle-bound birds coast 160 feet above the north end of Lake Washington. Several break off just over Portage Bay and drop onto tony East Shelby Street, home to medical doctors and other professionals. Starting in September 2013, these crows paid special attention to one house in particular.

That's where then-six-year-old Gabi Mann began treating the curious visitors on a regular basis—peanuts in the backyard bird feeders, handfuls of dog food thrown across the lawn. The birds came to anticipate this backyard tasting menu; they'd line up on telephone lines like patrons at a high-profile restaurant opening.

Gabi's mom, Lisa Mann, had read *Gifts of the Crow* and was moved to enroll in a class its coauthor was teaching at UW. Plus, her daughter had something to show Professor Marzluff: dozens of trinkets the birds had left Gabi. Shirt buttons, paper clips, an earring, a blue Lego piece—the birds bequeathed their human benefactor with tokens to show their appreciation or, more likely, to keep the dog-chow train coming.

Gabi and her gifts caught the attention of the BBC, and the story went global. It was, after all, a viral-ready, heart-warming tale of wildlife and human life converging, featuring a cute, charismatic girl with a penchant for natural science.

Not everyone on East Shelby Street, however, was so thrilled. The neighbors were furious. The Mann family's bird feedings, according to [documents](#) filed in King County Superior Court, attracted rodents. "The rats are more abundant than I have ever seen in my 44 years of living in this house," complained one resident on an online Portage Bay community forum. Residents also complained of bird droppings on their cars and houses, which damaged the paint—and cawing so earsplitting, they claimed, they couldn't enjoy their backyards.

Fifty-one neighbors signed a petition beseeching the city to intervene and force the Manns to stop. In addition to fecal matter, rats, and noise, the petition cited health risks from airborne [illness](#), danger to people with nut allergies, and potential interference with the homeowners' ability to sell or rent their houses.

In August of 2015, the next-door neighbor who owned the home east of the family and the neighbor to the Mann's immediate west filed a lawsuit. They sought \$200,000 in damages. "This story isn't about neighbors trying to stop a girl from feeding birds," one plaintiff wrote. "In fact, the scale and frequency of feeding is far greater than what can be accomplished by a child. Feedings are ongoing throughout the day, even when the daughter is at school."

The case exposed a [community](#) at odds—a war of name calling, dueling gotcha photos, and a countersuit by the Manns.

"I'd say over 100 per day go there to feed," noted one witness, who lived across the street. "There is a steady stream of crows going in and out like an airport from the Manns' yard." He also claimed to have observed Lisa Mann throwing bird feed from a moving car—and that the crows followed the car in pursuit.

Both sides shared photographs and video footage to make their case. One of the plaintiffs submitted a photo of a mini mountain of bird shit, recently sprayed off a deck with a hose and circling the drain in a Shelby Street gutter. The other had allegedly set out rat poison and hung a dead crow in his yard, in plain view of Gabi, in an apparent attempt to ward off her faithful flock; her mother submitted an image of the dead bird to the court. The plaintiffs counterpunched with a photo of a rat brazenly exploring a garden in the middle of the day.

The defendants insisted that their neighbors were overreacting, that the feeding was a mere hobby, one that helped their young daughter connect with the natural world at large. Professor Marzluff seemed to agree. "Portage Bay is a historic nesting area for crows," he told the court. "They have historically existed in great numbers there." He refuted the neighbors' claims that the crows cawed day and night, or that the food had anything to do with the noise. He posited that any excessive wailing was due to perceived danger, such as the dead crow hung in the neighbor's yard. (Paging soon-to-be doctor Kaeli Swift: dissertation evidence in Portage Bay.)

The case was ultimately settled out of court in September 2016 for an undisclosed sum—and a promise from the Manns to limit the bird feedings for eight years.

But the saga reveals the passion and fury crows can elicit. It reveals something else, too. That an interest in wildlife and their social dynamics can have a profound effect on a young person and lead them to extraordinary things. Gabi Mann is not the only one.



Crows throughout the city, including at the University of Washington (pictured), have become attuned to our daily rhythms.

IMAGE: [MIKE KANE](#)

SHE WAS EIGHT YEARS OLD and she had trouble reading. The Spokane elementary school she attended in the mid-1990s wanted to hold her back a grade. *Was something wrong with her?* Sometimes she wondered. The pediatrician had her on Ritalin. She hated Ritalin. It left her feeling separate, other.

She was a curious girl, though, and wildlife in the hills around Spokane kept her rapt. She pushed herself to read so she could [learn more](#) about them: the Sawtooth wolf pack, which stalked the mountains of nearby Idaho.

By the time her family moved to the Seattle suburb of Mercer Island in the early 2000s, Kaeli Swift could read, had kicked Ritalin, and knew science was her jam.

She zeroed in on birds, and corvids in particular, as a biology major at Willamette University, in Oregon. She joined Marzluff as a graduate student at UW in 2012.

Now she's standing in a back lot of the university on a cloudy April morning holding a dead bird and recreating her most important experiment as perturbed crows orbit, screeching and scolding.

It's hard to overstate the intensity of this experience. Nearly 30 banshees freaking out. They're 20 feet above, where they have the advantage of height and numbers, and all their attention and ire is directed at you. The nerve-fraying shrieks blast from every direction. A crow funeral is disorienting, a bit scary, and more than a little awe inspiring.

This morning the noise has drawn out a university maintenance worker from behind a utility building. He's tall, sports a short white beard, and wears a bright orange safety vest. Is he here to admonish Swift for all the noise? Just a casual, awestruck observer? It's hard to tell. She's had the occasional run-in with angry people during her experiments throughout the city. She's even had the [cops](#) called on her. Trying to talk over the din would be pointless, it's so loud. So the man stands there, expressionless.

Swift says her funeral study demonstrates how crows process death and then warn one another about potential dangers. A dead crow, clearly, means something bad has happened to a crow. The presence of a potential predator, be it a bobcat, Joe with the soul patch, or Swift walking around on a Thursday, appears to make their warnings all the more urgent.

Years ago, Swift will later confess, she bonded with a female crow she had studied on campus, identifiable by its green and orange band. Scientists, of course, are discouraged from connecting emotionally with their subjects, lest it harm their objectivity. But it turned out this crow's territory was Swift's campus-adjacent bus stop. She had named the crow Go (its partner was Stop), and long after the study was over, Swift began feeding Go while waiting for the bus, where every day the crow waited for her. Go was old, at least 14, Swift estimates (crows can live up to 20 years), and admits she became quite attached.

Last July a colleague informed Swift, over email, that Go had been found dead on campus. "That just sort of like broke my heart in such a deep way."

Loss, of course, is at the core of Swift's funeral study. *How do intelligent organisms deal with it? How do we cope?* She says that when her grandmother died recently and she attended the funeral, she didn't know what to do with herself. She worried that her clinical views of death—she is, after all, a wildlife biologist—might come out and upset her family.

At the same time, Swift [treats](#) the deceased participants in her work with a dignity not typically associated with scientific research.

When she finally covers up the dead crow in today's reenactment of her funeral experiment, it's with a gentle precision, as if the linen was a religious shroud. At that the birds slowly grow quieter. Without one of their own to mourn, the circle above thins and some crows retreat to a power line or disappear altogether. Light cawing remains, but a person can now hear herself talk.

The orange-vested university maintenance worker drawn in by the commotion still stands nearby and is still hard to read. He takes a wary step toward Kaeli Swift. A kind of “What magic is this?” wary step.

Before he speaks he looks up again at the emptying sky, and back down at the 30-year-old woman standing in Sorels and placing a dark object back into a shopping bag. “Did you do all that?”

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