

Bird Symbols of Canada

Part 12

Yukon

Provincial Bird: Northern or Common Raven (*Corvus corax*)

The Canadian Government website indicates that the Yukon adopted the Northern Raven in 1985 as its Territorial Bird. The website goes on to say:

“The Northern Raven is seen everywhere in Yukon. It is a very intelligent bird and an opportunistic feeder, feasting on everything from carrion to groceries left in the back of pick-up trucks.

The raven is the largest member of the crow family and has a body length of up to 70 centimetres.

The raven is called “crow” by Yukon First Nations people and is the subject of many stories passed from generation to generation.”¹

There is specific legislation – the Raven Act – in which the Yukon Legislature adopted the Northern Raven as its bird:

*“Official bird 1 The bird popularly known as the northern raven and known biologically as the common raven (*Corvus corax*, sub-species *principalis*) is adopted as the official bird of the Yukon. S.Y. 2002, c.187, s.1”²*

eBird Canada says of the Northern Raven:

“All black bird with wedge-shaped tail. Larger than a crow with thicker, longer bill. Bill longer than head. Tends to be solitary. Cruises along roads looking for carrion. Inhabits primarily rural areas in open country or forests. Uses variety of habitats including high desert, coast, sagebrush, tundra, and grasslands.”³

eBird also provides background on the range of the Northern Raven, which is a resident of North America, coastal; Greenland, most of Europe, and countries in central Asia, as far as Mongolia.

The Northern Raven is apparently a very talented bird, in particular with regard to mimicry, and according to a Yukon tourism website:

“Ravens can talk and sing with an ability to make more than 100 vocalizations.”⁴

¹ <https://www.canada.ca/en/canadian-heritage/services/provincial-territorial-symbols-canada/yukon.html#a61>

² https://legislation.yukon.ca/acts/raven_c.pdf

³ <https://ebird.org/species/comrav>

⁴ <https://www.travel yukon.com/en/discover/about-yukon/yukon-facts>

Canada Post has issued only the one stamp featuring the Northern Raven and that was on the first mini-sheet issued in 2016. Here's the FDC from that issue, with the Raven also taking a prominent position on the envelope design:

2016 [Provincial] Birds of Canada



Image source: <https://www.canadapost.ca/>

Kosta Tsetsekas and John Belisle (Signals Design, Vancouver) were responsible for the FDC design. Canada Post priced the FDC at \$5.25 and issued 11,000 of them. The Mini-sheet design was by illustrator Keith Martin. One of the characteristics that Martin sought to represent from the Raven was *“the dramatic stare”*.⁵

In Canada, the Northern Raven resides in various habitats from grasslands, mountains, forests, coastlines to the outskirts of towns. The Raven is generally comfortable living close to humans. Ravens also have a varied diet, which includes plant matters, invertebrates, eggs and other animals. They are also scavengers on prey that are killed by other predators, e.g., wolves.

The most important characteristic is their smartness, adaptability and problem-solving abilities. Moreover, they are also able to communicate what they have learned to other Ravens, in part because they are social birds and are also able work together to achieve their aims⁶. Their intelligence and ability to cooperate does make them dangerous when searching for food, as they are able to work in pairs, for example, when raiding seabird colonies: whilst one bird distracts the parent, the other attacks the nest⁷.

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https://www.canadapost.ca/web/en/blogs/collecting/details.page?article=2016%2F07%2F12%2FBirds_of_canada&cat=stamps&cattype=collecting

⁶ <https://blog.cwf-fcf.org/index.php/en/the-raven-meet-one-of-canadas-most-intelligent-birds/> and <https://www.allaboutbirds.org/>

⁷<https://www.allaboutbirds.org/>

Facts about the Northern Raven:

- It is an acrobatic flyer, sometimes doing somersaults in the air;
- Breeding pairs of Ravens are territorial and work to exclude other Ravens; and
- In Winter, young Ravens, on finding a carcass, will call up other Ravens to help overwhelm by sheer numbers the competition.⁸

Aside from Canada, there are a number of postal authorities that have issued stamps featuring the Northern Raven. Some of which are rather good, including the following examples:

1981 Iceland



Image source: www.stampworld.com

This stamp comes from a set of three, with the other two featuring a Wren (50) and a Golden Plover (100).

1988 Greenland - Birds



Image source: www.stampworld.com

This stamp comes from a set of four bird stamps designed by Jens Rosing. The other stamps in the set show the Gyr Falcon (symbol of the Northwest Territories), the White-tailed Sea Eagle and the Great Northern Diver (which, as the Common Loon, is the bird symbol of Ontario).

⁸ <https://www.allaboutbirds.org/guide/>

1990 USSR Zoo Relief Fund



Image source: www.stampworld.com

This stamp is part of a sheet of three others featuring the Golden Eagle and the Saker Falcon. The portrait of the Raven is a little different from a more orthodox side profile of the whole bird.

Surprisingly, despite the mystique surrounding the presence of Ravens in the Tower of London – “*If the ravens leave the Tower, the Kingdom will fall*” – Royal Mail has never featured the Raven on any of its stamps; and having just consulted the Gibbons “Great Britain Concise”, the Tower of London has only featured once too. Coincidentally, as I am writing this, Jeremy Vine is investigating on Radio 2 the disappearance of one of the seven Ravens (Merlinda, I think) and what implications this has for the future of the kingdom.

The September 2019 issue of Flight included a picture of the Universal Mail international postcard stamp that features a Raven, from a strip of five that celebrate the Tower of London:

Great Britain – Historic Royal Palaces (Tower of London) Bespoke Strip



Image source: <http://www.universalmail.co.uk/>

2020 Czechia - Birds – The Crow Family



Image source: <https://www.ceskaposta.cz/>

Česká Pošta issued this stamp on 17 June 2020, at a face value of 19 CZK, which was valid for domestic mail up to 50 grams at the economy rate. The stamp features the Common Magpie and the Eurasian Jay.

From my very brief research, I found that there is a good deal of mythology and symbolism attached to the Northern Raven, both in the Yukon and more globally⁹; but after some reflection, I decided that learning more about this was one rabbit hole that I did not want to go down. The link below provides some information on aspects of the folklore attached to this bird.

Perhaps oddly, the United States Postal Service has yet to issue a stamp featuring Edgar Allan Poe and a Raven, which you might think an obvious connection to reproduce, given the importance of “*The Raven*” to Poe’s literary success. There is, however, a Sao Tomé e Príncipe sheetlet from 2010 that features a portrait of Poe and a Raven in the background, though the main object of the sheetlet – the stamp itself – is of Oscar Wilde. Quite what the connection between the two writers is again something I have not investigated: outside the scope of this article.

⁹ <https://whatsupyukon.com/Yukon-Lifestyle/history/there-is-more-to-raven-mythology-than-clamshells-and-odin/>