



Bully for the Blackbirds: Inspiration From Nature

BY LORNE FITCH

Ravens are among the big dogs of the bird world. Photo © C. Olson

Weighing in at a few ounces, red-winged blackbirds are mostly heart and all courage. In defending their nests from predatory attacks they punch well above their weight class. Ravens and crows (corvids) are the big dogs of the bird world, occupying top positions, loud and bullying, filled with their own importance and stature, aggressive and predatory.

The big black birds remind me of human equivalents — economic mandarins — especially of the resource extraction persuasion and their government supporters and industry apologists. Always looking for a killing, at the expense of others.

Red-winged blackbirds are always on the defensive through the nesting period, guarding their nestlings. When a crow or raven enters their airspace it is all hands on deck (or in the air) scrambling to attack. Then it's akin to a First World War, close combat aerial dogfight. Blackbirds easily outmanoeuvre the larger, less agile corvids.

It's a combination of dive-bombing, darting in from the side, coming up underneath the corvid and sometimes a frontal attack, either as single birds or in formations of up to five blackbirds. These little fighters will sometimes momentarily land on the backs of the big birds and peck at their necks and heads.

This has to be very distracting to a big bird homing in on what looked like an easy meal. They wheel, stall, weave and eventually fly off with a rearguard of blackbirds shepherding them away. At a distant perch, the corvids will vocally vent their displeasure at being ousted by such small, insignificant birds.

It seems that the blackbird strategy of nagging, pestering, bluffing and otherwise annoying corvid predators works. Standing up (and flying up) to much larger threats is more effective than acquiescing. It may not produce a win all the time but it means there is always a cost to predatory tactics.

There is a lesson here, for us little people fighting

conservation battles. We can (and should) punch above our weight since our opinions, perspectives and recommendations have support from many Albertans. Constant, unremitting questioning of development proposals, pestering and nagging for impact assessments, commenting on and disclosing deficiencies, seeking the evidence to challenge the economic flimflam, holding government regulators to account and demanding accountability of politicians are all what red-winged blackbirds might recommend.

Like guarding a nest, there are a trio of tactics to be

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employed in conservation — constant vigilance, constant engagement and constant pressure. Heat and light applied to political and economic rhetoric. But it takes more than squawking on social media. Conservation requires action, such as letter writing (including to newspapers), bumper stickers, yard signs, peaceful protests and citizen science. When those things fail, there are legal options and resolutions. And don't forget the ballot box as a solution to failures of government to work for the public good instead of corporate favour.

Bully for the red-winged blackbirds. We can learn from nature how to protect it from predatory attacks.

Rise up! 🍀



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