

AROUND TOWN



WM. JORDAN

The winter flock Crows on John Street

They rested like a black blanket over John Street, a single, dark presence with thousands of shiny eyes. When they weren't perched high up in the tall trees, they circled, dove, and cawed. Pedestrians covered their heads and ran. The crows ruled, their majesty matched only by their mess.

Every night they gathered, settling thickly in the topmost branches. Wasn't it cold up there? What were they doing? A convention? A reunion of the cast of "The Birds"? And every morning they were gone, leaving residents of the street busy cleaning off their cars.

Out of desperation and curiosity, we contacted the U-M Museum of Zoology and were referred to Cyndy Sims Parr. Parr, a doctoral student in biology, probably knows more about crows than crows do. This nocturnal gathering is typical crow behavior, she said. The John Street "flock" probably included all the crows in town.

"I've never seen more than one of these," says Parr. "I call it 'the winter flock.' Last year in wintertime I counted about two thousand birds. When I first came to Ann Arbor four years ago, they consistently spent the evening in front of

Angell Hall, but two years ago they moved and ended up sleeping at the Amtrak Station. Last year, they came back to Angell Hall and they're still there."

Why the slumber party?

"It's a good question and I don't know the answer, but possibly they're safer from predators. It's just such a huge flock, so there are more eyes to watch out for owls. Owls are a big predator, though the anecdote that an owl will come flying along and pick up a crow—that's just a story. I'd be surprised if an owl could really get adult crows like these."

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During the day, says Parr, the crows disperse—usually to the areas in which they were born—and do what crows do.

"They eat just about everything—a lot

of roadkill, a lot of garbage, stale bread, old McDonald's bags. And they'll also eat seeds and corn during the warmer months, and insects and worms. In the wintertime, they don't have much in the way of insects and worms."

Toward the end of each day, an area's crows will begin to gather. "Often, they have a traditional 'staging area' where they collect in late afternoon. Historically, it's been Forest Hills Cemetery, or St. Thomas [Cemetery]. Cemeteries have a lot of good hardwood trees, and I don't know why they don't spend the night there. It's a good meeting place, but I guess it's not good for spending the night. Perhaps there are too many red-tailed hawks and owls. At dusk, they fly off to where they're going to spend the evening."

In her research, Parr needs to tag young crows when she finds them. There's no high-tech technique in this procedure. She scales tall trees, wraps young birds in a pillowcase, and carries them down—sometimes with hundreds of adult crows "flying around and yelling at me." On the ground, she gently tags the birds with a nylon patch that has two identifying letters on one side and her phone number on the other, then redeposits them in their nest. Tagging birds helps her track them and study their habits. So far, she's tagged about 130 birds; about twenty-five of those are seen regularly.

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AROUND TOWN continued

Parr's doctoral thesis will be titled "Social Behavior and Communication of American Crows." "I was interested in studying communication and wanted to study communication in a bird that was very social to see if vocalizations were involved in things they do in groups, such as flocking and breeding. What's known about bird song is on birds that aren't that

social. I try to tell people how smart crows are. In the spring, when they breed, they breed as a family group—the pair, plus one or two youngsters from previous years who stay around and help out. It's called 'cooperative breeding.'

"People seem to love them or hate them. I do find a lot of people who think they're fascinating."



Silicon antiques Matt's old computers

Forty hours a week, Matt DeGenaro handles some of the most powerful personal computers on the market. DeGenaro, who networks PC's at City Hall, has two IBM machines on his desk, each powered by a 486 chip, stocked with eight megabytes of RAM, and plugged into a sixteen-inch high-resolution color monitor.

Plenty of working professionals would be giddy if they had this power at their fingertips.

But the technology DeGenaro is truly passionate about sits in his basement, unplugged and pretty much untouched. If you ask to see these machines, DeGenaro will gladly unpack them, wipe off the dust, and power them up. One evening recently, he ushered us down the steep steps that lead to his collection.

Dressed in a T-shirt and jeans, his feet clad in Birkenstocks, he walks across the neatly swept stone floor. On a table sit