



Arizona's Raptor Experience, LLC

July 2019

~Newsletter~

Greetings from Chino Valley! Paul and I hope you are well and enjoying summer. We have big news! We adopted a dog – he's a 12-year-old chocolate lab named Deuce. His owner passed away and he needed a new home. We are so happy he came to live with us – he's a wonderful dog. (photos later...) Now on to birds...

Last month I told you about the Say's Phoebe nesting under the eaves. Well, she did it again and I had the joy of observing her interactions with yet another set of young...and this time, I noticed her interactions with other birds in the yard. That got me thinking about all the types of interactions that birds have when going about their daily activities. That's the focus of this newsletter. Hope you enjoy it!



Double Mantle – Coda and Odin (Harris's Hawks) mantling over the same kill.

The Social Life of Birds...

Have you ever heard the term ethology? It's the study of animal behavior. As you can imagine, this is a huge field that can focus on the individual or on groups of animals and their interactions. Either way, one thing is clear about studying the behavior of birds – whether it is a charm of finches, a gaggle of geese, a murder of crows, a parliament of owls or a convocation of eagles it is clear that all birds, at least for part of the year, have a social life. Some of their interactions are with members of their same species and are called *intra-specific* interactions. Those interactions with members of **other** species of birds are called *inter-specific* interactions. If you spend just a little time watching the birds in your yard, you will see plenty of examples of both.



Fledgling Say's Phoebes outside the office window.

As mentioned earlier, watching the behavior of the phoebe in our front yard has been a neat experience. In just part of a day I can witness hunting, food begging, feeding, mobbing of predators, territorial defense, communication, preening, etc. There's a lot going on! And, it's not only the phoebe's that are busy interacting. The hummingbirds have shown up in larger numbers this month and competition at the feeders has increased dramatically. If you listen carefully, they not only chase one another but vocalize at each other as well. However, as night draws near, obtaining calories becomes more important

than defending a food source and they line up together on the same feeder they fought over a few hours before.

The quail now have many chicks in tow and even though they live in coveys, parents quickly chase others away from their family group, probably to decrease competition for food. Watching out for their chicks can be a daunting task – not far from our house I stopped to watch a pair of quail and 22 chicks cross the road! Ravens also show up daily as a family to drink from the bird baths and to scavenge whatever food is available. They pick up dried rat skin or mouse parts from the yard (leftovers from the bird mews) and dunk them in the bird baths to rehydrate them. The three young birds sit on the fence and watch the chickens with fascination. They also like to gather in a shade tree in

the front yard and spend hours chatting back and forth. I love the sounds they make! The sounds of the roadrunner, however, have captivated both Paul and me. The adult male stops in place with a food item in his beak, lowers his head, puffs his body and hums a deep call to the female or his chick. Quite often the chick will appear, and food beg until he is fed. So cool!

While watching the birds in the yard is fun, I do also enjoy noting the behaviors I see in the raptors. For example, this past winter Leo (Bald Eagle) and Ellis (Golden Eagle) shared a perch one snowy morning. Bald Eagles are social birds and congregate in large numbers, especially in winter, around open water and food sources. Golden Eagles, however, are more solitary outside the breeding season. Although Ellis doesn't mind Leo being close by, I believe the proximity to another eagle is beneficial for Leo.



The Saw-whet Owls regularly roost near one another and provide companionship. Coda and Odin (Harris's Hawks) live together year-round and interact in many ways. They compete for food (Coda usually steals from Odin), mate, tend their nesting tray, play with toys and crab at each other when the mood strikes. They are also incredible hunting partners.



Whether the behaviors we see in birds are intra- or inter-specific, they are all necessary for the health and survival of birds. The level of social interaction varies greatly from species to species but can be understood in most situations:

Dramatic **courtship and mating rituals** help to secure the bonds each year in birds that mate for life and rear their young together, helping to ensure their survival.

Competition for nesting sites and food resources ensures that genetic material from those best able to compete will be passed on to new young.

Mobbing of predatory birds by bands of different species of songbirds benefits all when predators are driven away.

Cooperative hunting, as seen in Harris's Hawks, benefits family groups in areas with a limited or difficult food supply.

Many birds practice **colonial nesting** which minimizes overall predation on the young.

Communal roosts as seen in crows can also minimize predation by night predators like owls.

Benefits of family groups living together include **learning** from one another as Ravens and Crows do.

Group feeding is quite necessary among scavengers as observed in the Old-World Vultures. Not all species can break through the skin of a dead animal, so a feeding hierarchy of sorts forms allowing larger birds with larger, stronger beaks to break open the carcass and eat first, then allowing others that wait on the sidelines an accessible meal.

Each fall millions of birds **migrate** in large groups to their southern overwintering areas and back to their springtime northern breeding grounds.

What behaviors do *you* see in the birds in your back yard?

Water saving tip: Keep a bucket in the shower – collect the cold water as you wait for the hot to come through – it can be used to fill bird baths or water plants. That's what we do!

Meet Deuce!



A visit to the neighbors to meet Jenni and have a snooze.

He had minor surgery, thus the head donut!

