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**Instructor Brian Bedrosian points out an abandoned raven's nest in Gros Ventre campground where he found Luna, a raven whose siblings died for reasons that are unknown. Bedrosian and Court Smith taught a Teton Science Schools Summer Sojourn class on corvids.**

# Students flock to Science Schools

**Experts teach facts about magpies, ravens and crows in classrooms and in the field.**

By Aimee Chou

Luna was the teacher's pet, literally, sans the well-behaved attributes.

The feisty raven, whose gender remains a mystery, repeatedly hopped off teacher Brian Bedrosian's right shoulder, wings aflutter under tables nuzzling shoelaces and laptop cords. Luna changed the PowerPoint slide show by slamming the keyboard and knocked student Diane McGee's breakfast off the table.

Finally, after hopping on bellies of dead, stuffed members of its own class, corvidae (magpies, ravens, crows), the teacher's pet was dismissed from a class beside itself with guffaws.

"These are not inconspicuous creatures," commented co-teacher Court Smith

between the Luna's harsh honking squawks. "You don't have to be a really smart birder (to notice them)."

Less inconspicuous is the distinction between the raven, which is triangular in tail and beset by bad hair blues, and the comparatively smaller crow, which is circular in tail and far less abundant.

Consider Luna an essential, charismatic element of Bedrosian and Court Smith's "Magpies, Ravens and Crows" Summer Sojourn class hosted by Teton Science Schools in Kelly. Asked to teach, Bedrosian and Smith initially wondered, "Who'd come to this class?"

Saturday, about six students with varying degrees of corvid knowledge schlepped through Gros Ventre campground fields peering through binoculars for the slightest flutter of the magpie's long iridescent tail and white belly. Despite numerous game sightings, wind and late-morning heat kept corvid – reportedly the first species sent from Noah's ark – largely out of sight save for magpies behind the National Elk Refuge east of Bridger-Teton National Forest.

A running joke was the prevalence of ravens and crows in the dumpster behind Bubba's Bar-B-Que Restaurant, over presumably "natural habitats."

What was seldom seen was often heard, as magpie calls rang from behind bushes. Later, a flirty staccato tickled ears, a universal magpie call Smith said could mean anything from "stay away from my babies" to "babies, come and get your food."



**Luna perches on Bedrosian so the class can get a good look at the features of a common raven. Luna lives at the Beringia South Research Institute in Kelly.**

Like cell phone ringers, magpie vocalizations, up to 85 of them, are eclectic and imbued with multiple meanings.

"Now imagine six to seven (magpies), at 4:30 in the morning, and you know why people hate magpies," joked Smith, who entertained students with comical but realistic pantomimes of corvid behavior. Smith is researching the impact of black-billed magpies on local songbird communities with the Conservation Research Center.

Corvidae have doubtless acquired a bad rap. Supplanting science with folk-

lore, Smith and Bedrosian chronicled corvids' cultural transition from "creators of the world" to "bearers of death." In Jewish lore the former is no exaggeration, as ravens had violated the decree against lovemaking on the Ark.

On the Gros Ventre field reinforcing Bedrosian's earlier in-class discussion of raven decapitation from nests (when plucked by predators), Charlotte Farrar found and dangled a crow head and tufts of nest material from her fingers. It's a fate that may well have visited Luna, an imprinted "half-wild" orphan presum-

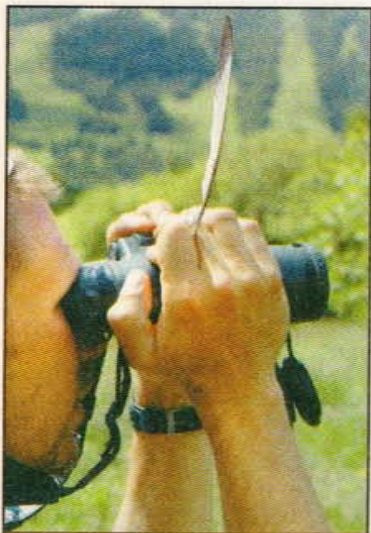
ably pushed off a nest and now rehabilitated in Beringia South Research Institute in Kelly, where Bedrosian is finishing his master's on common raven ecology.

His research has included once standing in 10-degree weather, with a drumset, in a white suit attempting to spot ultraviolet bluebirds.

In captivity, corvids have lived up to 44 years. In the wild, a corvid is lucky to see its 14th birthday.

Corvid lore runs deep. Upon hearing that these birds make more advanced

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**Instructor Court Smith helps the class sight several magpie nests near the National Elk Refuge.**

# CORVIDS

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tools than chimps, students bantered about intellectualism. Betsy Hesser told of how they once outfoxed her dogs, stealing food from their dishes. McGee noted their notoriety for opening packs on Yellowstone snowmobiles. Smith himself had been flummoxed by their repeated escapes from the rabbit cage traps he set.

"They're as smart as I thought they were," commented Farrar, for whom the corvid class is only the latest in her avid participation in Teton Science Schools' seasonal tracking, wildflower and geology classes.

These savvy scavengers rim their nests with bison, elk, dog and horse fur and even barbed wire, Bedrosian said.

"Jackson has been a protected landscape in the past 70 to 80 years, and something has substantially changed about the ecosystem on the surface. ... what is it? This is one of the grand questions we try to answer," he explained the birds' ecological impact after class.

To peg ravens and crows as "dirty birds" is deep-seated in society, and dispelling such myths is a "slow process," he added. Akin to aquarium bottom-feeders, they do the unpopular – but eco-essential, job as decomposers for the nearly 100 pounds of entrails per game

animal left behind by hunters who prize the flesh but not organs.

They flit along roads scanning for roadkill prior to playing the "jumping jack" game: intently scrutinizing carcass, pecking at it, jumping back and again for an hour until "absolutely sure it's dead and not going to bite them," said Smith.

He noted the inverse relationship between ectoparasite and corvid numbers – the more ectoparasites, the more death of game that ravens and crows consume. Sadly, a research project has noted another trend: scavenger ingestion of lead spread into game by powdered bullets.

"We humans have to realize that the pristine intact ecosystem is one of the economic drivers here. ... (if overdevelopment continues) we kill the exact same thing people come here for," Smith commented after class.