THE GHOST CROW

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Cemeteries, historically and literarily, have long been the haunt of those ectoplasmic phenomena known as ghosts. It should have been no great surprise when, four years ago this February (1986), I first saw, perched on a tombstone in a feathering snowstorm, a white Crow, surely the familiar of a long departed and decayed witch or warlock. One can still hope for such mysteries in this mundane suburban parking lot called Cherry Hill, New Jersey, but to no avail.

It was, of course, an albino bird, in itself no small mystery. Over the succeeding years it has appeared again and again, always within several blocks of the cemetery, growing older and more wary. It was, symbolically, the last bird I saw in the dying day of the old year. (Having first found this bird, I began to notice, on rarer occasions, two other aberrant crows, both with bilaterally complete white secondaries and normal black coloration elsewhere). The white crow is often seen in association with the normal black ones and is just as aggressive and just as difficult to approach.

Albinism is not rare among birds, especially in certain groups such as ducks, geese, pheasants, hawks, thrushes, New World blackbirds, swallows, and, of course, crows. Melanin, a pigment found widely in nature, is most prevalent in the darker birds. Chromatophores containing melanin gather in the Malpighian layer of the new feather before it sprouts, and lay down granules of pigment in the barbs and barbules of the feather between layers of keratin. Melanin pigmentation is hormonally controlled, notably by the thyroid gland. The depth of color is governed genetically and by such factors as humidity and diet. (Desert birds are usually quite a bit paler than those of the same species from more humid areas). The final color of the feather is determined by the density of pigment granules as well as by the structure and arrangement of the feather itself.

Albinism, or the absence of pigment, is associated with a genetic recessive trait which inhibits the formation of the enzyme tyrosinase, responsible for melanin synthesis. There are four general types of albinism currently accepted by most geneticists. There are 1) total albinism, the rarest form, with complete absence of melanin from feathers, eyes, and skin (the eyes appear pink due to the blood vessels of the retina shining through the colorless iris); 2) imperfect albinism, with melanin partially inhibited (reduced) in eyes, skin, or feathers, but not totally absent; 3) incomplete albinism, with melanin absent from either feathers, skin, or eyes; and 4) partial albinism, the commonest form, with complete or partial pigment loss within local body parts, such as white secondaries on a normally all black bird. White feathers in a normally dark bird may also appear as the result of shock, dietary deficiencies, or old age.

If these classifications, however artificial, are acceptable, then the white crow of Colestown Cemetery (for that is where I found it) is an incomplete albino, having white feathers, but with a gray beak and legs, and dark eyes.

The incidence of albinism in birds is estimated at one half of one percent, as reported by Michener and Michener after ten years of banding experience with over thirty thousand birds of various species ("Abnormalities in Birds," *Condor* 38: 102-09). The most common species of North American bird to exhibit albinism is the American Robin, with the House Sparrow a close second. Albinism is not rare in crows, fifty-eight records having been reported by Gross in 1965 ("The Incidence of Albinism in North American Birds," *Bird-Banding* 36 (2): 67-71). It has been found in all orders and 54 families of North American birds, being most common in dark birds such as crows, hawks, and blackbirds and less common in red and yellow species.

Among birds, true albinos probably do not live long, especially the smaller species. As prey, their white color makes them more obvious, and true albinism is often associated with defective vision and decreased flying ability, a lethal combination of handicaps.

The ghost crow of Colestown Cemetery, however, continues to flourish and has become a now familiar and haunting vision on cold winter days, when the sight of this particular bird quickens the pulse and gives pause to wonder what strange roost it seeks.

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