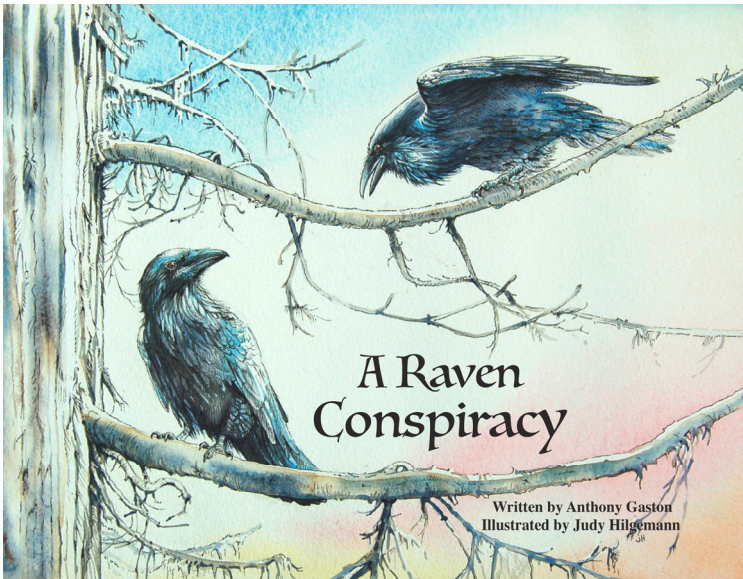


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# Q&A with Anthony Gaston, Author of *A Raven Conspiracy* (Laskeek Bay Conservation Society, 2022)

By Jessica Sims



*Corvid and nature lovers of all ages will enjoy the latest children's book from author, ornithologist, and long-time OFNC member Anthony (Tony) Gaston. A Raven Conspiracy is the story of Krah, a coastal raven from Haida Gwaii, who is chosen to represent local ravens at the Kag-moot, a gathering of the world's ravens that happens once every generation. The reason for this gathering? The birds have decided that human wastefulness towards nature has come to a breaking point, and something must be done. As Krah puts it: "The abalone, once our most esteemed food, is almost gone... Clams, urchins, sea-cucumbers—all are threatened" (p. 35). To attend the meeting, Krah must journey across the ocean in an adventure that takes him from the Pacific coast of Canada to the mountains of Lake Baikal. Once all together, the ravens devise a 'conspiracy' that will include the world's children in a combined effort to get the older generations to finally listen to their message of conservation and moderation.*

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A Raven Conspiracy features artwork by Judy Hilgemann, an artist and illustrator from Haida Gwaii. All proceeds of book sales go to Laskeek Bay Conservation Society, a Haida Gwaii-based NGO started in 1990 to promote conservation and citizen science in the archipelago.

Books can be purchased at The Spaniel's Tale Bookstore (1131 Wellington St. W., Ottawa) or online at <https://www.laskeekbay.org/books/a-raven-conspiracy-written-by-anthony-gaston-and-illustrated-by-judy-hilgemann>.

**J:** *Without giving anything away, what is the 'conspiracy' that the title of the book refers to?*

**A:** The ravens are very upset over the way we're handling the planet, and they think the problem is all these machines that are running all the time. They dream up a plan to stop the machines briefly, because they realize they can't shut things down indefinitely. To do this they produce this conspiracy, which also involves local children in Haida Gwaii.

**J:** *The main character is Krah, the raven.*

**A:** Yes, he's my main character, and his partner Kahline—we can't say wives, because there's no marriage for ravens. Although they do stay together. They're probably more faithful than we are.

**J:** *I liked that the protagonist was a raven. I feel like ravens and crows typically have bad PR. There's an "unkindness" of ravens, a "murder" of crows. So it's nice to see a hero portrayed as a corvid.*

**A:** Yes, although certainly it's not the first time ravens have been portrayed as heroes or somewhat heroic... other people have cast them as heroes, and if you remember they fed Elijah in the Bible, so they're kind of a hero in the Bible.

**J:** *That's true. [Ravens] also feature in Indigenous mythology.*

**A:** Yes, although in Indigenous mythology, they did some good stuff and they did some bad stuff.

Ravens are just really, really interesting birds. They are very smart, but of course in ways that are very different from us. Their concerns are very different from ours, their senses are very different from ours. Their world is different from ours. In *A Raven Conspiracy* I had to bring together the two worlds. [In the book] they communicate with children, and it turns out—I don't think I'm giving anything away here—that very young children can understand raven talk.

**J:** *So it's a bridging of cultures.*

**A:** Yes, a bridging of cultures. One thing that I don't think people are really aware of is that when you see a raven, that raven is always watching you. Ravens know way more about us than we do about them... Ravens are, to some extent, our competitors. In particular with grazing animals, ravens can be a problem. They will kill lambs, for instance. Or they'll even kill full-grown sheep if they're stuck in the snow (they peck the eyes out). Sheep farmers hate ravens. In Britain, where I come from, farmers hate ravens. There's a lot of antagonism towards corvids.

**J:** *You were born in the U.K., and you've travelled extensively. Why set this book in Haida Gwaii?*

**A:** I've worked in Haida Gwaii for the last 40 years. I was working for Environment Canada as a research scientist. I had projects in Haida Gwaii, and we were working on

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seabirds. The ravens were a major predator of Ancient Murrelets in particular, which was the species we were focused on. Everything sort of tied together with this book. When I think about Krah and his partner, I think of the pair that nested very close to our camp on Reef Island, and a lot of the behaviour that I describe is typical of these coastal ravens. I mean, if you take a raven around here, they would have totally different ecology. Ravens are one of the most widespread species on the planet.

*J: In your career you've observed ravens in the Himalayas, the Arctic, the Pacific coast, and the Sahara. Why do you think they're so successful navigating all these variable climates and habitats?*

**A:** For the same reason as us. They are very intelligent. We think of intelligence as being that part of our mind which is not determined by our heredity, it's not instinctual. They learn, and they have a very long apprenticeship, like us. The young remain with the parents until the end of summer, and the parents teach them all the different food sources that they might obtain. And then, like I say, they're always watching what people are doing, what other animals are doing. They're great scavengers. One of the things you notice around [Ottawa] is that often as you're driving down a road there will be a raven flying in the opposite direction. They're looking for roadkill.

*J: I think it's safe to say that ravens and their counterparts, crows, have become some of the most ubiquitous birds in cultural narratives. Why do you think that is?*

**A:** Again, I think it's because they're so much like us. They are very smart birds, and you don't have to be acquainted with them long to realize how smart they are. I think it's that sort of kinship. Also, I think in one way or another they make a lot of use of us, especially in the role of scavenger.

Another very interesting thing about ravens is they won't give anything away. So, if you watch them, they know that you're watching them and they won't do anything. They'll sit there... Then, as soon as your attention is somewhere else, zip, they're off to get whatever it is they wanted to get in the first place.

I worked in the Arctic on a place called Digges Island, which is right off the northwestern tip of Quebec. There were ravens there that specialized in feeding on the eggs of Thick-billed Murres. There was a huge colony—100,000 pairs of Thick-billed Murres on this island, which is why we were there. During the egg-laying period, or the incubation period, [ravens] had 100,000 eggs that they could take. Being very smart birds, they knew how to get the eggs very quickly, and they could get way more than they could eat. So they cached them. It was the Arctic tundra, so there was lots of moss. They'd take these tussocks of the moss, and they'd stick their beaks in and make an incision. Then they'd stick the egg in. And then, because of the springiness of the moss, the moss would close over the egg, and you go up to that clump of moss, you could not see anything, you could not tell there was an egg in there unless you'd marked it very carefully. But the thing was, [the ravens] knew when you were watching them. Even if you were watching through binoculars from a kilometre away, they would not cache that egg as long as your binoculars were pointing at them. As soon as you took your attention away from them, zap, the egg was gone. You'd look back a couple of minutes later, and there's the raven standing there, and there's no egg.

*J: You've mentioned them watching us. I've read about corvids being able to recognize individual human faces. Did you have any experience with that and the ravens you spent decades with on Haida Gwaii?*

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**A:** I don't know about faces... Incidentally, 'Faces' is the raven name for us [in *A Raven Conspiracy*]. As Krahn announces at one point: "[Your face] is the main part we can see when you are all dressed up in those bags" [p. 8].

I'm sure they're capable of recognizing faces. I mean, there would be a lot more than that that they could use, our height and our build, the way we move. These would all be things that they would register.

I mentioned the [raven] pair beside our camp. One of the volunteers who'd come with me, I got her to study the ravens as a little sub-project. We set up a blind so that she could watch them fairly closely. The first day she was in the blind, the ravens wouldn't go near the nest, so after a couple of hours she had to leave the blind. She went back over several days, and after a while the ravens got accustomed to her. After a few days, she found that the blind was quite unnecessary, because the ravens knew perfectly well that she was in the blind... she just sat on a log. The birds carried on quite normally. They didn't take any notice of her, because they could see she was harmless.

**J:** *That was kind of them.*

**A:** Yes, it's very nice. I'll tell you an interesting thing. This is not in the book, and it has never been described for ravens before as far as I'm aware... Young ravens, like a lot of passerine birds, produce a fecal sac. Their droppings are contained in the sac, and the parents take the sacs from them... and drop it somewhere in the forest. But, that doesn't always work, so the nest can sometimes get fouled with the feces. What Siobhan [the volunteer] saw was that the ravens would take this Witch's Hair Lichen, the one that's very tufty—mossy—they'd pick it off the trees, and then they would go and clean up the nest with this lichen. So, they were using a tool. It's not the first time that ravens have been seen using tools, but it is a unique tool, as far as I know.

**J:** *That's fascinating, because it's not just tool use. It's the fact that they would care about something like sanitation and cleanliness. I feel that that's another level, too.*

**A:** Yes, that they recognize that the nest was getting fouled and they wanted to clean it up. That's pretty unique, because generally speaking you would expect that that fecal sac removal behaviour is instinctive, like it's instinctive on the part of the nestlings, and then it's instinctive for the parent on seeing it to remove it and drop it somewhere else.

**J:** *In your work as an ornithologist, have you noticed any impacts of climate change on ravens?*

**A:** A year or two back I published something in *Trail & Landscape* ["Rise of the Corvids", Vol. 53 No. 2] on trends in crows and ravens around Ottawa, and there's been a continuous increase since the Christmas Bird Count started. Ravens have moved into town. Two years ago, a friend who's in construction came to me and said, "We've got ravens nesting on our crane. We're finished with the crane, we want to move it. It's costing us \$10,000 a day to hire it." He said, "How long are these ravens going to take before they leave?"... But they left them there. I thought that was quite nice.

When I came to Ottawa, it was very rare to see a raven in any kind of urban situation. And now, I can hardly ever go out birding without hearing a raven. You don't necessarily see them, but somewhere there's a Braaaahh [raven croaking sound]. And they're watching. See? We can't see them, but they're watching us.

**J:** *That's ominous.*

**A:** Yeah. I thought during the pandemic, they're waiting to take over. 🦇