

THE JACKDAWS OF CELLBLOCK "G"

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It surely must be one of the most heavily guarded nest locations on record. But, the Jackdaws (*Corvus monedula*) have been photographed, and so has the nest hole, but the nest itself and its contents have only been revealed by inference. A concrete stairwell prohibits anyone in the cellblock attic from viewing the nest. Nevertheless it can be said with some confidence that the pair of Jackdaws at the United States Penitentiary at Lewisburg, Pennsylvania, built a nest and incubated eggs. It appears that young were fed. However, if any fledged, they did not survive more than a day or two.

The Lewisburg Jackdaws became public entities on May 23, 1985 when Corrections Officer Bill Sizer (a tower guard) called the author to inquire of the identity of a bird he had been seeing from his post for at least the past three weeks. His views were at times excellent, for the bird had perched on the Wall as close as 25 feet, and Sizer had the use of binoculars (an essential tool of more than one trade). Using written notes he described a crow-like bird with gray nape and cheeks, white eyes, black cap, and blackish bill and legs. He said the bird was smaller than the American Crow. Accustomed to all sorts of extraordinary descriptions of ordinary birds, I tried to suggest that the bird might be a pigeon, and did not fully appreciate how carefully he had observed and described his find. Only after nearly dismissing my caller did I pull a European field guide from my shelf and turn to the corvids. Instantly I knew he had been seeing a Jackdaw.

Sizer went on to suggest that there seemed to be a pair of birds and they may be nesting. I gave this little credence and would be proved wrong again. On the following day, with permission from his lieutenant, Bill and Mary Sizer and I searched the penitentiary grounds and on two occasions glimpsed a Jackdaw as it flew out of the cellblock area towards the east. The next day I located a vantage point from which the eastern portion of the prison could be scanned, found a lone Jackdaw there in a plowed field, and obtained reluctant permission from the landowner for a "few" birders to visit. Within a short time dozens of visitors were trying to identify Jackdaws at a distance of half a mile with spotting scopes inadequate for the task. At first most birders were fortunate as one or two Jackdaws frequently flew out from the prison to nearby fields and permitted close views. It was on one such occasion on June 7 that Robert Schutsky obtained the first photographs of a pair as they foraged in an alfalfa field that was being mowed.

John Petery, a birder who works in the penitentiary lab, returned from vacation on Monday, May 27, and began making valuable daily observations from close range. He realized that he had seen, but not identified, a Jackdaw on May 9, and had been told of a strange looking bird between "E"

and "G" Cellblocks in mid-March. Now, upon inquiry, he learned from staff and inmates that nesting material had been flown in by the birds. John located the nest entrance and personally saw food being carried into it by a Jackdaw. Although I had seen only a single bird on May 24 and 25, from May 28 onward observers invariably reported seeing a pair. John Petery's notes include—"Early June to mid-June. Birds seen carrying food—chasing birds from nest area—chasing crows in flight." "June 20 . . . last day I saw birds really active around nest site." "June 21 . . . no activity by birds at nest site." On June 24 Petery sighted a Jackdaw he felt was grayer than the two he had been observing. At about this time some birders at the plowed field thought they might have seen three Jackdaws. However suggestive, these reports fall short of confirmation of fledging. Furthermore, all subsequent observations indicated that only the original pair survived.



JACKDAW (*Corvus monedula*) at the United States Penitentiary
at Lewisburg, Pennsylvania, July 7, 1985.

Photo by John Petery

It is worth noting that the male feeds the female at the nest during incubation (which normally lasts 17 to 18 days) and brooding. Thereafter both male and female usually feed the young which fledge at 30-35 days. In most of Europe egg laying takes place in late April and early May. For fuller information on the biology of the Jackdaw see Goodwin, 1976 and the references cited there. For an account of North America's Jackdaw invasion in 1984 see Smith, 1985 and Yank and Aubry, 1985. Comparing this information with observations of Lewisburg's Jackdaws leads one to construct the following plausible scenario. The Jackdaws became especially conspicu-

ous in May as the male made frequent solo flights to and from the cellblock area to feed the female at the nest. By the end of the month both male and female were afield and feeding young. By about the third week in June the nestlings perished before or quite shortly after fledging.

The Jackdaws remained possessive of their site. On June 25 they evicted a pair of Starlings and removed the Starlings' nest material from a nearby hole leading to the same cellblock attic. Two days later Petery saw a Jackdaw carrying string into this new hole. However by July 1 it was clear that this activity had not led to a renesting. In fact from then until August 6 the pair was seen intermittently only on the cellblock roof shortly after dawn. They were not found at all between August 6 and August 15. Petery located them again in mid-August, and with some regularity throughout the fall he reported seeing them either in the vicinity of the nest area or in the fields on penitentiary land. On December 21 the two Jackdaws joined with American Crows, Fish Crows, and Northern Ravens to give the Lewisburg Christmas Count a memorable corvus coup.

LITERATURE CITED

- Goodwin, Derek. 1976. CROWS OF THE WORLD. Cornell University Press, Ithaca.
Smith, P. William. 1985. Jackdaws reach the New World. *American Birds* 39(3): 255-258.
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