

Ireland's crows

A beginner's guide to Ireland's birds

By Niall Hatch

Noisy, boisterous and ubiquitous, it's fair to say that crows (or "corvids," to get all ornithological for a moment) aren't everyone's favourite family of birds. I absolutely love them, however: they are incredibly intelligent, resourceful and attractive creatures, and we still have much to learn about them.

Ireland is one of the best places in which to observe this fascinating avian family, as several species occur here in higher densities than in other European countries. Some of them are easy to identify, while others are frequently confused with each other. With that in mind, we thought we would bring you an identification guide to Ireland's crows.



Rook. Photo: Richard T Mills

Rook: bare-faced cheek

These glossy black crows are a common sight in all parts of Ireland. When most people in Ireland talk about a generic "crow," this is the bird that they generally mean.

In certain lights **Rooks** can show a reddish or purple sheen to their plumage. They can be told apart from other species of crow by their shaggy 'trousers,' the looser feathering on their bellies and the bare facial skin around the base of the bill. This 'bald patch' is present only on adults; juveniles lack this feature and have fully-feathered faces, leading to possible confusion with the rare Carrion Crow. The two are best told apart by the more peaked crown of the Rook and by the shape of the bill: a Rook's upper mandible has a straight upper edge, while that of a Carrion Crow is curved towards the tip, making its bill appear blunter.

Rooks often forage in the company of other crow species, especially Jackdaws. When separating Hooded Crows and Rooks in flight, note that Rooks have faster and deeper wing beats, which makes their flight action appear more laborious.

Hooded Crow: strikingly black and grey

Roughly the same size as the Rook, and a common and widespread species across Ireland, the **Hooded Crow** is usually not encountered in such large numbers as that species. Large roosting flocks do gather together in the winter months, however. It tends to be a bit warier around humans than either the Rook or the Jackdaw, though still often visits parks and gardens. It is a very distinctly two-tone bird, with a pale grey body and contrasting black head, upper breast, wings and tail.



Hooded Crow, top, and Carrion Crow. Photos: Richard T Mills, top, and Alexas Fotos



Jackdaw. Photo: Richard T Mills

Jackdaw: pale eyes and grey nape

Often seen alongside Rooks, where their smaller size is immediately apparent (the name **Jackdaw** meant "small crow" in 16th-century English), this species can also be distinguished by the fact that its plumage is a very dark sooty grey, rather than truly black all over. The neck and the back of the head in particular are paler grey, almost silvery, in tone.

The Jackdaw is the only dark-plumaged crow species in Ireland that has pale-coloured eyes: they are an unusual bluish-white shade.

It is ubiquitous across Ireland and is commonly seen in a range of habitats, including urban areas. They are often encountered in pairs, but in the winter especially will form large flocks, often with other crow species. The Irish name for the species, **Cág**, is a good description of its distinctive call.

Carrion Crow: rare all-black visitor

The **Carrion Crow** is closely related to the Hooded Crow, and to all intents and purposes is an all-black version of that species. Although an extremely common bird in much of Britain and western Europe, it is generally just a scarce accidental visitor to Ireland, though a small breeding population has become established in parts of coastal Co Down.

Carrion Crows and immature Rooks can look confusingly similar, and, as mentioned above, bill shape, head shape and the extent of the feathering at the bases of the legs are the best ways to distinguish the two birds.

Where they encounter each other, Carrion Crows and Hooded Crows will freely hybridise, producing offspring of intermediate plumage with random grey patches on their otherwise black plumage.



Chough. Photo: Eric Dempsey

Chough: confined to coastal areas

In Irish this species is known as **Cág Cosdearg**, meaning "red-legged Jackdaw," a very appropriate and descriptive moniker. **Choughs** are indeed roughly the same size as a Jackdaw and, uniquely for an Irish corvid, have bright red legs and feet. Their most distinctive feature, however, is their long, down-curved red bill.

Their plumage is a glossy, almost oily, black, and they have deeply fingered wing-tips. This latter feature would suggest that they are skilled fliers, and indeed they are: they are perhaps the most aerobatic of Irish birds, performing loop-the-loop manoeuvres, barrel rolls and even flying completely upside-down, often seemingly just for the fun of it.

In Ireland, this gorgeous, charismatic crow occurs only in coastal areas. It is absent from our east coast, but occurs in local clusters in the west, south and north. Ireland is one of the key European strongholds for this threatened species.

Usually quite shy, though occasionally surprisingly tame (especially in areas where it has learned to associate humans with food), it is often best detected by its voice: a unique electric "chiarr" sound, from which its English name derives.

Jay: the crow that doesn't really look like a crow

Our most colourful crow, the **Jay** is a widespread though secretive bird that especially favours areas with oak trees, which provide its favourite food, namely acorns. Jays are unmistakable when seen well, with brownish-pink body plumage, a black tail which offsets a striking white rump patch (usually the feature which first grabs the eye when the bird is seen flying away), a black 'moustache' on either side of the face and gorgeous metallic blue patches at the bend of each wing.

Ireland's Jays belong to a unique **Irish subspecies**, or 'race.' Our birds are darker, especially on the head, than those found in Britain and mainland Europe, and they also tend to be shier and more wary of humans.



Magpie. Photo: Richard T Mills



Raven
Photo: Richard T Mills

Raven: huge, with a very deep voice

Our largest crow, and indeed the largest passerine (or "songbird") in the world, the **Raven** is a massive, imposing creature, bigger even than a Buzzard. They are entirely black, with massive, heavy, formidable bills and shaggy feathering on their throats. They also have distinctive wedge-shaped tails that help to distinguish them from other crows in flight.

The Raven is quite a common and widespread bird across Ireland, though it generally favours upland areas and tends to shun human company. That said, some individuals do occasionally visit, and even nest in, urban and suburban areas.

They make a variety of different calls, many of which are extremely low in pitch and therefore instantly separable from those uttered by our other crow species.



Jay. Photo: Richard T Mills

Magpie: everyone knows this one!

The black-and-white, long-tailed **Magpie** really needs no introduction: it is one of the few bird species that pretty much everyone in Ireland, birdwatcher or not, can identify. It is common and widespread, and in this case it seems that familiarity has bred contempt: it is not a popular bird with many people, perhaps on account of its reputation for eating the eggs and chicks of other birds. In truth, lots of other predators do this too, not least cats, rats and Grey Squirrels, and the Magpie is only doing what comes naturally to it. They eat a wide variety of other foods too, of course, including rodents, and their scavenging behaviour helps to keep our towns and countryside clean and free of disease.

Magpies are rather beautiful birds, and definitely deserve a second look. Those black patches of their plumage are highly iridescent, and in good light take on a stunning array of metallic green, purple, blue and bronze tones.

For more information about Ireland's crow species, please visit www.bit.ly/IrishCrows.