

Kelly institute rescues wily raven from grease barrel

by Jake Nichols

For a smart bird, "Exxon" was in a pickle.

First spotted hopping around in a parking lot near Bubba's BBQ, the year-old raven was coated in grease and unable to fly. Calls from concerned citizens eventually reached Craighead Beringia South, a nonprofit science and education organization specializing in, conveniently, ravens, among other things.

Project biologist Bryan Bedrosian has been spearheading raven research for the Kelly-based ecology institute since 2001. He finally secured the bird three days later after a woman called to say she had a sick-looking raven eating birdseed out of her backyard feeder.

"That is extremely rare for a raven," Bedrosian said.

It has become common practice for the ravens and crows to seek the used grease stored in barrels behind Wendy's and Bubba's. Some employees even claim to have seen crafty ravens join together - four and five in a group - to lift covers off the containers.

"A lot of the youngsters hang out in town," Bedrosian said. "It's not the best food, but it's easy food. How she fell in that fried grease - maybe pushed by another bird or lost her balance - who knows, but she was definitely dunked; there's no doubt about that."

The bird happened to be one of 1,000 that Bedrosian has banded for study in the Jackson Hole area. "'Exxon,' as we like to call her, was a first-year bird born this spring," Bedrosian said. "Like any species when they just leave their parents, finding food and knowing where to go, where to hang out, is tough in the first year. If they make it through the first year they are likely to survive."

Ravens are part of the Corvid family which includes crows and jays. They are considered extremely intelligent.

"The whole Corvid family is quite capable of complex behavior, of reasoning things out," said the man who founded Beringia South in 1998, Derek Craighead.

"The raven is one of the smartest birds, if not smartest animals. There have been some documented cases of ravens using tools, picking up a stick to smash open a food source."

Craighead and Bedrosian have witnessed firsthand the ingenious behavior of the prolific scavenger while climbing trees to band or check on birds. "The adults will frequently pick off pieces of branches and pinecones and drop them on us," Craighead divulged.

Contrary to popular belief, rifling through a bird's nest and handling fledglings does not cause the mother to abandon her young, according to Bedrosian.

"That's a good wives' tale to keep the birds safe. Birds don't really have a sense of smell," he said.

Craighead has 40 years worth of research on ravens in the valley. Indications are the opportunistic bird has enjoyed a population boom over that time while their nearest competitor for food - the red-tailed hawk - is seeing its numbers dwindle just as fast.

"We do have, in Jackson, one of the largest documented breeding populations worldwide," Craighead said.

Most recently, Bedrosian published a study on the effect of lead toxins on ravens, which feed on gutpiles left by elk hunters. Both Craighead and Bedrosian were startled to see high levels of



Biologist Bryan Bedrosian prepares to release the raven named "Exxon," who survived its plunge into a barrel of grease discarded by a restaurant.



Exxon flies off after a few washings at the Craighead Beringia South institute, a nonprofit science and education organization based in Kelly.

Arizona, which found condors were picking up traces of lead from old carcasses.

As for "Exxon," the fortunate raven at the top of the food chain and the bottom of a barrel: She was released back into the wild on Monday after a few washings with Dawn dishwashing detergent. She weighed in at a healthy 925 grams after a diet of scrambled eggs and meat.