

# Tuesday Club Nature Notes

with Jan Flamank



## ROOKS

I may have mentioned it before, but the Corvid family of birds are amongst my very favourite birds, and of the whole Corvid family - crows, ravens, jackdaws, rooks, choughs, jays and magpies – rooks are the ones I like best. They are so intelligent, highly sociable, and also very handsome!

We need to look carefully to help us distinguish between crows and rooks, as they are mistakenly all thought to just be big black, scary birds. Corvids have often been thought of as vermin that simply require eradication. But as we have learnt far more about their behaviour and have come to understand more about how intelligent and adaptable they are, there is, thankfully, less persecution now.

Numerous scientific tests of corvids, including rooks, have clearly shown they have intelligence on a par with primates and dolphins. These include their understanding of displacement of water in order to reach food, an ability to think ahead and problem solve, to use teamwork, making and using simple tools, the ability to mimic a wide variety of sounds and they also have a lovely tendency to ‘play’ in complex ways. This implies enjoyment as well as mere survival.

As humans we have always tended to think of ourselves as at the top of the evolutionary tree, and judge other species by very inappropriate human parameters. This is evident in the term 'bird brain'. Avian brains are built in different ways to ours and they have developed a part of the forebrain, called the hyperstriatum, which we and other mammals lack. Corvids have a large brain, similar in size to ours in ratio to body size, and packed with an exceptionally large number of brain cells. Rooks have excellent memories, make mental maps, enjoy socialising with each other - and they can fly!

Jays are the most colourful and distinct member of this bird family, but rooks have a gorgeous purple gloss to their feathers, and the base of their beak is bare and grey, not covered in fine feathers, and they have a more loose, 'baggy trousers' look to their thighs. How marvellous is that! Their beak is longer and sharper than in carrion crows, and it is also said that if you see a flock of crows then they are more likely to be rooks, as they are far more sociable.

Rooks nest together in colonies called rookeries, and the collective nouns for rooks include: a clamour, a wing, a congregation and a storytelling, which is lovely as they do chatter loudly to each other.

As an artist, I have made a series of artworks about this amazing bird, so have included one here, Rook, in watercolour and mixed media.

**We will learn more about this extraordinary family of birds, but in the meantime, look closely when you see a crow, and you may find that it is instead, a rook. Baggy trousers, bare faced brilliance and all.**

