

Status and Occurrence of Crested Caracara (*Caracara cheriway*) in British Columbia.

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Introduction and Distribution

The Crested Caracara (*Caracara cheriway*) is an elegant raptor that is a year round resident in its home range. The Crested Caracara has three populations in the United States that are separate from one other, but this species is monotypic. The most isolated population breeds locally in central Florida where the population is designated as Endangered due to population declines and habitat loss (Wheeler 2003a). The population is estimated at 150 pairs and 200 immature birds (Wheeler 2003a). The Crested Caracara is also found in southeastern Texas where it is more widespread with recent expansion of some birds breeding in Louisiana (Wheeler 2003b). The Crested Caracara is also found in southeastern Arizona where it is very local with only 20-25 known breeding pairs, all found on the Tohono O'odam Nation Indian Reserve in Pima County (Wheeler 2003b). This species prefers open habitats, typically grassland, prairie, pastures, or desert with scattered taller trees, shrubs, or cacti in which it nests (Morrison and Dwyer 2012). The range of the Crested Caracara is more extensive in Mexico where it is more common and occurs on the southern half of the Baja Peninsula, the Pacific slope of southern Mexico and along the Gulf of Mexico south to southern Mexico along the coast of the Yucatan Peninsula, locally into the interior of Honduras, and throughout El Salvador, locally throughout the rest of Central America and into South America (Howell and Webb 2010, Morrison and Dwyer 2012).

The Crested Caracara is also found in certain areas of Cuba (Morrison and Dwyer 2012). It is a vagrant to Jamaica (Raffaele *et al.* 1998).

The Crested Caracara is an extremely rare bird away from its core range, but this species was historically reported as a rare straggler to Oklahoma (Beierman 1991) and New Mexico (Ellis *et al.* 1988). There are recent sightings from southeastern Oklahoma near the Texas border (Morrison and Dwyer 2012). The Crested Caracara is also an accidental in Alabama (Duncan and Duncan 2001), and Mississippi, but there have been recent sightings in the state (Woodson and McClellan 1981, Morrison and Dwyer 2012).

In the past, Crested Caracara records away from the species core range were treated as likely escaped birds from either zoos or falconer's birds (Morrison and Dwyer 2012). In the past couple of decades this argument has lost a lot of weight as more and more birds have been found in faraway locations (Morrison and Dwyer 2012). There are records for Crested Caracara from Colorado (Evans 1998), Indiana, Iowa (Lampe 2003), Massachusetts, Minnesota (Glassel

1995), North and South Carolina (Potter *et al.* 1980), Nevada, South Dakota (Artman 2001), and Wyoming (Morrison and Dwyer 2012).

In Eastern Canada, the Crested Caracara has been found in, Nova Scotia (Morrison and Dwyer 2012), New Brunswick (Morrison and Dwyer 2012), Ontario (Pittaway 1995) and recently Alberta (R. Worona Pers. Comm.).

Along the west coast of North America, the Crested Caracara is still an accidental to casually-occurring species, but has increased in frequency of sightings in California in recent years (Hamilton *et al.* 2007, Tietz and McCaskie 2014). There are 14 accepted records by the California Bird Records Committee (Hamilton *et al.* 2007, Tietz and McCaskie 2014). The Crested Caracara is an accidental species in Oregon where there are 5 accepted records by the Oregon Bird Records Committee (Mlodinow and Irons 2005, OFO 2012), In Washington State, the Crested Caracara is also an accidental species with 3 accepted records by the Washington Bird Records Committee (Mlodinow and Aanerud 2008, Wahl *et al.* 2005, WBRC 2013).

In British Columbia, there are only a handful of records. Recent evidence would suggest that these birds are likely legitimate vagrants, rather than escaped birds from captivity, as was often previously thought (Campbell *et al.* 2001).

Identification and Similar Species

The identification of the Crested Caracara is covered in all standard North American field guides. There is no other species that looks like the Crested Caracara and identifying one should be fairly straight-forward for any lucky observers. The following identification criterion is taken from Morrison and Dwyer (2012).

The Crested Caracara is a medium-sized raptor with an overall length of 49–58 cm and a weight of 1,050–1,300 g. The adult male and female look basically the same in plumage characteristics, but the female is only slightly larger in overall measurements, notably wing chord and bill depth. The colour pattern of adult birds is striking, unlike that of any other raptor. The head is slightly flattened, with a prominent black cap, the occipital feathers are somewhat elongated to form a crest. The lower back, abdomen, and wings are brownish-black to black. The sides of the head, throat, breast, upper back, and undertail-coverts are buffy-white. The tips of the feathers on the upper back and breast are horizontally barred and spotted with brownish black. The tail is buffy-white with 10–12 brownish-black bars and a broad, dark, terminal band. The lores, malar, and suborbital regions are naked with sparse to fine bristles and are bright yellow-orange in colour. The legs are long with flat feet that are fairly extended with only slightly decurved claws that indicate its terrestrial habits. The upper tarsi are feathered brownish-black

to black with the lower tarsi and toes yellow and the claws are black and the skin is yellow. The crop is quite conspicuous when full and protruding. The pale bluish bill is deep vertically and compressed and the eyes are dull orange-brown. The wings have ten primaries, with P7 and P8 being the longest feathers. When perched, the wingtips do not extend beyond the long tail. The wingspan is approximately 1.2 m. In flight, fully extended, the wings are held flat with shallow and steady wing-beats, with primaries 5 through 10 slightly separated. The long tail and stiffly outstretched neck is distinctive. This species seldom soars, but instead flies low along the ground or just above the treetops. The large white patch at the base of the outer primaries is conspicuous in flight.

The first year and juvenile birds are similar to adult birds in overall pattern, but in overall plumage are tawny-brown and creamy buff rather than brownish-black and white. The feathers on the breast and the upper back are longitudinally tipped and streaked with tawny brown, and are not horizontally barred and spotted with black like adult birds. The tips of the wing coverts are white, but this disappears upon first prebasic molt. The facial skin, legs, and feet are pinkish-gray. Immatures that are a year or older show a similar overall pattern as found on adult birds, but the plumage is more brown than black and the light areas are buffy white. The legs and facial skin are a pinkish-yellow. Immature birds are best distinguished from first year juvenile birds by the darker brown plumage, horizontal barring rather than longitudinal streaks on feathers of the breast and upper back.

Occurrence and Documentation

The Crested Caracara is an accidental species in British Columbia with only 4 Provincial records (Toochin *et al.* 2014, see Table 1). There are so few records that no clear pattern of vagrancy can be ascertained (Toochin *et al.* 2014, see Table 1). However it does appear that the Crested Caracara can appear anywhere in the Province and keen observers should keep an open for this species. The first Provincial record was found at Drury Inlet due east of Port Hardy between May 4- June 3, 1998, and was well documented with photographs and was observed scavenging with a flock of Northwestern Crows (*Corvus caurinus*) (Plath 1998). The second record was found and photographed by Wayne Ray on August 18, 2008, at Fort Fraser, well west of Prince George, in a farmer's field scavenging with a flock of American Crows (*Corvus brachyrhynchos*) (Toochin *et al.* 2014, see Table 1). The Crested Caracara will scavenge for food (Morrison and Dwyer 2012) and is likely why it has been found with flocks of Crows in 2 of British Columbia's 4 records. The third record was by Russell Cannings who had a good but brief look at a bird in flight on June 30, 2011, near the Revelstoke Airport (Toochin *et al.* 2014, see Table 1). The fourth record for Crested Caracara in British Columbia was found and photographed by Graham Ford on July 20, 2015, of a bird sitting in a tree in his backyard just north of Nanaimo (G. Ford Pers. Comm.).

Until very recently, Crested Caracara records that were found far away from the species' core range were dismissed as escaped birds (Wahl *et al.* 2005, Hamilton *et al.* 2007). The main reason past rare bird committees voted this way was due to the Crested Caracara's restricted breeding range coupled with its generally non-migratory nature (Hamilton *et al.* 2007, Morrison and Dwyer 2012). As more and more records accumulated over the past few decades across North America, it became clear these occurrences could not all be explained by escaped birds (Hamilton *et al.* 2007). In fact the Washington Rare Bird Committee in the late 1990s conducted an exhaustive search of zoos in North America searching for evidence of a captive origin for the bird found at Neah Bay from January 4-February 1, 1998 (Anderson and Shiflett 1998, Wahl *et al.* 2005). It was discovered that no Crested Caracaras had been reported as escaped at that time (Wahl *et al.* 2005). The Committee's research further uncovered that for many decades it was illegal to have Crested Caracaras in and that in fact the pet trade of this species had ceased by the early 1970's, where even getting a license through for falconry was illegal in the States of California, Oregon and Washington State (Wahl *et al.* 2005). Since 2001, California has had 11 records of Crested Caracara throughout the state (Hamilton *et al.* 2007, Tietz and McCaskie 2014). Prior to this influx there were only 4 previous accepted state records, though there are a few that were rejected due to concerns about origins (Hamilton *et al.* 2007). The records from 2001 onwards occurred over a large area of the state and efforts to determine if multiple birds were involved was carefully undertaken by the California Rare Bird Committee (Hamilton *et al.* 2007, Tietz and McCaskie 2014). Many of these reports in California and also at least 1 from Washington State coincided with El Nino years, but others don't so it is unclear why these birds head north (Hamilton *et al.* 2007, Wahl *et al.* 2005). After careful consideration, the California Rare Bird Committee has reversed its thoughts on Crested Caracara records (Hamilton *et al.* 2007). Unless of course it can be proven to be an escapee from a zoo, these birds are now accepted on an individual sighting basis (Hamilton *et al.* 2007, Tietz and McCaskie 2014). The birds that have ended up in British Columbia are probably birds that have wandered north from California, but the origin of these birds is unclear. The Texas population of Crested Caracara is the only growing population with good numbers of birds (Morrison and Dwyer 2012). In Mexico the species is fairly common (Howell and Webb 2010), whether British Columbia's records come from Mexico or Texas, they invariably involve birds that have wandered a long ways from their core range.

2015 produced several incidences of wandering Crested Caracaras not only in British Columbia, but also in northern Washington State, Alberta, New Brunswick and Nova Scotia (e-bird database 2015). This rash of extra-limital sightings across the continent further reinforces the notion that such occurrences both past and present likely pertain to wild birds. Retaining past records of Crested Caracara, even when considered an escapee has proven invaluable as those

records can now be revisited with current knowledge of Crested Caracara vagrancy patterns. Having dismissed those records because they seemed impossible would have been most unfortunate. This species shows that over time it can be possible to show a pattern of vagrancy, even when the prevailing wisdom of the time period is to dismiss a species as an escapee. The recent rapid increase of records in California and across North America makes it seem that this species could turn up in British Columbia again in the future. The fact that records have come from all over the Province means this species can turn up pretty much anywhere.



Figure 1 & 2: Record #4: Crested Caracara adult north of Nanaimo on July 20, 2015.
Photo © Graham Ford.



Figure 3: Record #4: Crested Caracara adult north of Nanaimo on July 20, 2015.
Photo © Graham Ford.

Table 1: Records of Crested Caracara for British Columbia:

- 1.(1) adult May 4- June 3, 1998: *fide* Wayne Diakow, mobs (BC Photo 1854) Drury Inlet due east of Port Hardy (Plath 1998, Campbell *et al.* 2001)
- 2.(1) adult August 18, 2008: Wayne Ray, mobs (photo) Fort Fraser, well west of Prince George (Toochin *et al.* 2014)
- 3.(1) adult June 30, 2011: Russ Cannings : Revelstoke Airport (Toochin *et al.* 2014)
- 4.(1) adult July 20, 2015: Graham Ford (photo) north of Nanaimo (G. Ford Pers. Comm.)

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