

First Fish Crow Nest in Illinois

by Vernon M. Kleen and John Schwegman

The Fish Crow (*Corvus ossifragus*) is somewhat of a new-comer to Illinois since "no Illinois sight records were established for this crow before 1962" (Bohlen, H.D. 1989. The Birds of Illinois.). Although the bird has now been recognized, at least by sound, in Illinois for 30 years, its official status as a nesting species remained limited to adults carrying food for young at a few locations along the Ohio and Mississippi rivers in extreme southern counties. Birders, aware that an Illinois nest had never been reported, have been closely watching for the first Illinois record.

On 15 April 1992 while walking at Ft. Massac State Park in Massac County, John Schwegman saw a Fish Crow carrying nesting material. He also saw three Fish Crows sitting next to two large stick nests high up in two different sycamore trees just east of the fort in the park. Schwegman alerted the Illinois Department of Conservation Natural Heritage field and staff biologists.

Vernon Kleen revisited the site from noon to 1:30 p.m. 17 June 1992, approximately two months after Schwegman reported the nests. Upon arrival, Kleen noticed a pair of adult Fish Crows that appeared extremely disturbed, owing to their incessant calling. A few minutes later, Kleen discovered a young Fish Crow on the ground that had recently died. A short distance away, he found a second recently deceased young crow. A third young bird, still alive, but not yet capable of flight, stood on the ground a few yards away, head drooped and covered with flies. A fourth young, on the ground several more yards into the woods, was also found, its head drooped but not yet covered with flies.

The third young bird, when disturbed by Kleen's approach, regurgitated a moist food mass that included the head and bill of a swallow spe-

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cies. The two live young were retrieved, but soon died and were deposited at the Illinois State Museum in Springfield (specimen 1: male, No. 660293; specimen 2: unnumbered alcohol specimen - fide H. David Bohlen). The cause for the suspected early departure of these young Fish Crows from their nest is not known; however, it may be that they were blown out of their nest by the excessive winds of the previous day.

After diligent search, the actual nest was located less than ten feet from the top of one of the large sycamore trees (height undetermined) that Schwegman had reported. The nest was nearly overhead from the spot

where the first dead Fish Crow was discovered.

The nest tree measured three feet in diameter at chest height and leaned slightly to the northeast. Due to the extreme difficulty in locating the nest from any ground position, an exact nest description is not available; however, the nest was made of sticks, placed in a crotch that had at least one main and one or two lesser branches, and was positioned 22 feet southeast of the center of the trunk of the tree.

The nest tree was part of a forested area with bare ground as understory. It stood 320 feet north of the edge of the Ohio River, and 180 feet north of the inside edge of the paved road through the park.

Although Fish Crows have been regularly seen and heard in this area for several years, as well as at many other river locations in Illinois north to Adams County, the sighting represents the first reported record of an Illinois nest.

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Site of Illinois' first Fish Crow nest.

