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EDUCATION NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC SOCIETY NEWSROOM |

Who Are You Calling a Bird Brain?

FUNDING OPPORTUNITIES

Bird brain was considered an insult until a recent discovery that bird brains have a similar structure to that of the mammalian neocortex (the cognitive processing center). Researchers have begun looking for, and finding, avian intelligence in the large-brained species: crows use tools, rooks cooperate to get food, and western scrub-jays plan for the future....

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Bird brain was considered an insult until a recent discovery that bird brains have a similar structure to that of the mammalian neocortex (the cognitive processing center). Researchers have begun looking for, and finding, avian intelligence in the large-brained species: crows use tools, rooks cooperate to get food, and western scrub-jays plan for the future. But is intelligence restricted to species with large brains?

That's what I want to find out!

I'm looking at two highly innovative species: large-brained New Caledonian crows and smaller-brained great-tailed grackles. I am investigating what advantages a large brain gives the crows when comparing their cognitive task performance with that of the grackles.

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Photo copyright Adam Lewis

I'll study wild grackles in Santa Barbara, California and wild-caught aviary crows in New Caledonia. Luckily, I have a National Geographic Society / Waitt Grant, which makes this expensive research possible.



Photo copyright Jolyon Troschianko

I'm about to leave the Santa Barbara summer behind for the tropical winter of New Caledonia, but I'll stay in touch. I will be posting a video blog about once per week from New Caledonia called



Where in the ocean is New Caledonia?

Life in the Field. To start this adventure, I show you what it takes to pack for such a trip in the video in this post. Whew! I'm glad that's over!

What do you want to know about life in the field on this remote island in the middle of the Pacific Ocean? Let me know and I'll see if I can cover your topic in my next video. Even though I'll only have internet access once every couple of days, it will be nice

to feel connected to a larger community while I spend two months at a tiny field station.

Leaving for the Santa Barbara airport in a few,

Corina

And now for a bit of Terry Pratchett...

"The Death of Rats skipped across the snow, slid down a drain pipe and landed on the roof of a shed. There was a raven perched there.

It was staring disconsolately at something.

Squeak!

'Look at that, willya?' said the raven rhetorically. It waved a claw at a bird feeder in the garden below. 'They hangs up half a bloody coconut, a lump of bacon rind, a handful of peanuts in a bit of wire and they think they're the gods' gift to the nat'ral world. Huh. Do I see eyeballs? Do I see entrails? I think not. Most intelligent bird in the temperate latitudes an' I gets the cold shoulder just because I can't hang upside down and go twit, twit. Look at robins, now. Stropky little evil buggers, fight like demons, but all they got to do is go bob-bob-bobbing along and they can't move for bread crumbs. Whereas me myself can recite poems and repeat many hum'rous phrases--'"

(Pratchett 1996, pp.43-44, Hogfather)

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MEET THE AUTHOR

Corina Logan

For my PhD at the University of Cambridge, I studied what birds in the crow family do after they fight: do they make up with each other or go to someone else for support? Now I am a Junior Research Fellow at the SAGE Center for the Study of the Mind at the University of California, Santa Barbara. With the help of a National Geographic Society / Waitt Grant, I study what birds know about their physical and social worlds. (Photo copyright Rod Rolle)



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