



# The discovery and journey of the Clark's Nutcracker



**Terry McEneaney** is ornithologist emeritus for Yellowstone National Park, and is the author of three books: "Birding Montana," "Birds of Yellowstone," and "The Uncommon Loon." He has been watching birds for 50 years and is one of Montana's most experienced birders.



Photo by Dave Menke/U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service

**EDITOR'S NOTE:** Montana Best Times has been featuring some of the fascinating adventures Terry McEneaney has had as Yellowstone National Park's ornithologist. Following is another excerpt from a new book he is writing, titled "Lucky Feathers — Adventures and Experiences of a Yellowstone Ornithologist."

In my spare time, I try to study all different aspects of avian ecology. One bird that has always fascinated me has been the Clark's Nutcracker (*Nucifraga columbiana*), and the way it was discovered and described. The first written description of this bird occurred on Aug. 22, 1805, when William Clark of the Lewis and Clark Expedition, while heading west and passing the area near the north fork of the Salmon River in Idaho noted:

"I saw to day [a] Bird of the woodpecker kind which fed on Pine burs it's Bill and tale white the wings black every other part ..."

The following year, the Expedition was heading east through along the Clearwater River, about two miles north of Kamiah, Idaho, and Clark made a more detailed May 28, 1806 note:

"since my arrival here I have killed several birds of the corvus genus of a kind found only in the rocky mountains and their neighbourhood. [it] has a loud squawling note something like the mewling of a cat. the beak of this bird is 1-1/2 inches long, is proportionably large, black and of the form which characterizes this

## A Clark's Nutcracker checks out its surroundings.

genus. the upper exceeds the under chap [beak; properly, mandible] a little. the head and neck are also proportionably large. the eye full and reather prominent, the iris dark brown and puple black. it is about the size and somewhat the form of the Jaybird tho reather rounder or more full in the body. the tail is four and a half inches in length, composed of 12 feathers nearly the same length. the head neck and body of this bird are of a dove colour. the wings are black except the extremities of six large f[e]athers occupying the middle joint of the wing which are white. the under disk of the wing is not of the shining or g[l]ossy black which marks its upper surface. the two feathers in the center of the tail are black as are the two adjacent feathers for half their width the ballance are of a pure white. the feet and legs are black and imbricated with wide scales. the nails are black and remarkably long and sharp, also much curved. it has four toes on each foot of which one is in the rear and three in front. the toes are long particularly that in the rear. This bird feeds on the seed of the pine and also on insects. it resides in the rocky mountains at all seasons of the year, and in many parts is the only bird to be found."

Once this strange bird was

examined in the hand by Clark, he had a change of mind, and described it as being more of a crow/jay type bird. So, the first time it was described as a woodpecker, the second time a corvid or crow. Surprisingly, this type specimen or first actual physical specimen of its type to be described survived the final leg of the Lewis and Clark Expedition, and made it all the way to the Peale Museum in Philadelphia. Then around 1810, it was examined and drawn in detail by the famed ornithologist Alexander Wilson. Finally in 1811, Alexander Wilson published the first bird book in North America titled "American Ornithology," and in Volume 1 of this book he labeled this bird "Clark's Crow," in honor of William Clark who discovered the bird initially.

Eventually, the name Clark's Crow would be changed to the name we find today, the Clark's Nutcracker. So the facts be known, William Clark never did name this bird for himself, or during the Lewis and Clark Expedition. And like many of Lewis and Clark discoveries new to science, they never received the credit they deserved. Part of this was due to the fact that fate was not on their side, and the Lewis and Clark journals were not published until 100 years later, long after Lewis and

Clark died. So the journals were actually written by a third party.

But one thing is certain: Whenever I hike or look out my window and notice a bird collecting, storing, and/or cracking white-bark pine or limber pine nuts, I think not only of today but yesteryear — and try to envision what it was like to be in William Clark's moccasins, noticing and discovering an odd bird new to science, not once but twice. But better yet, I try to envision the resolve of Lewis and Clark to preserve and protect this unique feathered gem of a discovery, and long journey and thoughtful care of a woodpecker/crow specimen through the Rocky Mountains en route to Philadelphia.

More short stories from "Lucky Feathers — Adventures and Experiences of a Yellowstone Ornithologist," will be featured in forthcoming issues of Montana Best Times. In the meantime, enjoy Montana birds! And the Best of Big Sky Birding to you!

**EDITOR'S NOTE:** Bird watching questions can be sent to Terry McEneaney at P.O. Box 326, Gardiner, MT 59030 or by contacting [www.ravenidiot.com](http://www.ravenidiot.com). If by mail, please include a phone number at which you can be reached.