

EXTINCT BIRDS OF THE WORLD

#28 PIED RAVEN



PIED RAVEN
type specimen
shot September 24th, 1869.
Zoologisk Museum, Copenhagen

The Pied Raven, *Corvus corax varius* morpha *leucophaeus*, was a colour morph of the North Atlantic subspecies of the Common Raven, *Corvus corax varius*, which was only found on the Faroe Islands and disappeared in the mid twentieth century. It had large areas of white feathering, most frequently on the head, wings and belly. The beak was light brown. Apart from that, it was identical to the black birds, morpha *typicus*.

In modern Faroese, the bird was called *hvítravnur* ("White Raven"), an older name was *gorpur bringu hvíti* ("White-chested Corbie"). Normal individuals of the subspecies *varius*, which is found on Iceland and the Faroe Islands, show a tendency towards more extensive white feather bases compared to the nominate subspecies. But only on the Faroes, did a genetic variance of the melanin become fixed in the population, causing some individuals to have about half their body colouration white. While albinism occur in many bird populations, the Pied Raven seems not to have been based on such occasional "sports", but on a constantly, or at least regularly, present part of the local raven population.



As the pied birds freely interacted, and interbred, with the normal ones, (which are still found on the islands) they did not constitute a distinct subspecies. However, their frequent appearance illustrates two aspects of population genetics:

1. genetic drift, which in small populations will shift allele frequencies over time, which in the case of the Pied Raven, caused the occasionally occurring mutation to spread and become a permanent part of the gene pool of the ravens on the Faroes, and
2. how a new, distinct subspecies may evolve over time from a distinct part of the population. Had the black and pied ravens mated preferentially with their own colour, in time, the pied part of the population might have prevailed, as its coloration probably would have provided

better camouflage when preying on seabirds, most of which are also black-and-white.

The existence of the Pied Raven is mentioned in reports by Lucas Debes in 1673, and Jens Christian Svabo in 1781/82. Carl Julian von Graba in 1828 speaks of ten individuals he saw and states that these birds, while less numerous than the black morph, were quite common.



Skarvanesi's *18 fuglar* with the Pied Raven in the lower left corner.

Díðrikur á Skarvanesi, the first Faroe painter, painted the *Fuglar* series, which portrayed a number of birds. On his *18 fuglar* ("18 birds"), the bird in the lower left corner depicts a Pied Raven. This painting is on display in the Listaskálin museum of Faroe art in Tórshavn.

As exemplified by Skarvanesi's painting, which obviously was done from mounted specimens, the Pied Raven was an object of interest to collectors. During the nineteenth century the pied birds were selectively shot because they fetched high prices; the *sýslumaður* (sherriff) of Streymoy, Hans Christopher Müller, once paid two Danish Rigsdaler for a stuffed specimen from Nólsoy. Such a sum, a healthy amount of money for the impoverished farmers of Faroe, made shooting a Pied Raven a profitable enterprise. Ravens in general were regarded as pests, and in the mid-nineteenth century, every Faroe male of hunting age was required by Royal Decree to shoot at least one raven, or two other predatory birds, per year or be fined four skillings. One of the last Pied Raven specimens was shot on November 2nd, 1902 on Mykines. In the autumn of 1916, another bird was seen at Velbastaður and on Koltur. The last known individual was observed in the winter of 1947 on Nólsoy, but disappeared in late 1948. As these last sightings caused considerable interest, it seems probable that after 1948, no Pied Ravens have been hatched.

The Pied Raven, being a colour variation, only differed in very few alleles (as opposed to numerous genes in a true subspecies) from the black birds. Therefore, as the 1947 bird occurred when there was no population of pied birds extant it is not certain that the form is indeed extinct. Theoretically, the allele(s) could still be present, but hidden in the black population, and a Pied Raven could be born again one day. However, as the raven population on the Faroes has declined to a few hundred birds, at best, over recent decades, this does not seem very likely.

R.V.C. with help from Wikipedia