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The Crested Caracara

By Mark B. Bartosik

Crested Caracara (*Caracara cheriway*) are commonly seen walking in open fields and pastures feeding on a variety of vertebrate and invertebrate prey, as well as on carrion. The Crested Caracara is in many parts of South and Central America. Distribution is often fragmented. In the United States it occurs only along the southern border in Texas and Arizona and as isolated populations in south-central Florida. It is very rare in southwestern Louisiana. Single records from other states are considered as rare stragglers or even escapees in farther north records.

Despite the fact that the Crested Caracara is common in many places there is much less data collected about this species when compared to available observations of other birds of prey. Due to the fact that it is generally assumed to be primarily a carrion feeder (probably because most often observed when feeding on carrion) this bird, like other scavengers, receives little sympathy from many people. Also general information about this species available on the internet is often

misleading and speculative. Often known as “Mexican eagle” the Crested Caracara is described on numerous sites as a Mexican national bird, which is wrong. The bird featured on the Mexican coat of arms is the Golden Eagle (*Aquila chrysaetos*). This bird is known officially as *Águila real* (literally, “royal eagle”). In 1960, Mexican ornithologist Martín del Campo identified the eagle in the pre-Hispanic codex as the caracara or “quebrantahuesos”. Even so, the Golden Eagle is considered the Mexican eagle for official purposes and for the same reason is considered the official bird of Mexico.

One of the most interesting and intriguing behaviors is the Caracara’s “Head-Throwback Display.” On many internet sites, for some reason, this behavior is sometimes described as mysterious and some suggest that this is just a part of courtship.

Even in more serious papers opinions are written very carefully. As an example here is a paragraph from one of the papers with references published on the web. (<http://southeast.fws.gov/vbpdfs/species/birds/acca.pdf>)



Crested Caracara pair remain together year-round—note clearly visible bulged yellow crop from the recent meal on the bird at left.

Photo by author



Crested Caracara—"Head-Throwback Display"

Photo by author

Little information is available on vocalizations of this species; however, in the morning or evening, the caracara may throw its head back until it almost touches its shoulders and emit a high, cackling cry that resembles its Brazilian name (Bent 1961). Observations of caracaras in Costa Rica and Mexico indicate that this call may be a part of pair formation or courtship. The only other vocalizations heard in Costa Rica were a one-syllable greeting and an alarm call (Palmer 1988).

The best available work summarizing all known data about Crested Caracara behaviors is: Morrison, J. L. 1996. Crested Caracara (*Caracara plancus*). In *The Birds of North America*, No. 249 (A. Poole and F. Gill, eds.); The Academy of Natural Sciences, Philadelphia, PA, and The American Ornithologists' Union, Washington, D.C. This account can be obtained digitally online (through subscription at www.bna.birds.cornell.edu) or through ww.buteobooks.com (hardcopy).

Here I would like to describe my observations on Crested Caracara's calling behavior given in conjunction with "Head-Throwback Display" as this was a part of

many interesting intraspecific and interspecific interactions with other birds around. Most observations were done during my trip to the Lower Rio Grande Valley on December 26 and 27 when I had an opportunity to spend about 10 hours observing Crested Caracaras coming to a coyote carcass in an open field located in Hidalgo County, Texas. When starting the call, the caracara's head was erect and then, often in slow motion, it would throw

its head back until the crown was touching its upper back. It can hold its head thrown back for some time while continuing to call. A loud, continuous, crackling/rattling call was made during the display.

Indeed I observed both partners making this display right after copulation, which took place after a long period of feeding together. When the pair walked away from the carcass (about 100 feet) I did not observe any pre-copulation behavior, as I was busy watching a juvenile take over feeding on the carcass at the same time. (Please note that Crested Caracaras copulate year-round.)

"Head-Throwback Display" was used often in different situations, through all parts of the day (not only morning or evening), by birds of all ages and status: adults, both pairs and single adults, and juveniles as well. I also often saw it (at different times and locations) as a last effort to scare away intruders getting close to the place where adult(s) were perching with juveniles. From the recent, long observations it was clear to me that this display has two common uses: Showing/announcing take over of the territory and/or food source (coyote's carcass in described case)

and also it was performed when the Crested Caracara was trying to gain access to food already taken by a bird from another species. It was performed several times near a feeding juvenile White-tailed Hawk (by both adult and juvenile caracaras), sometimes very close, but no caracara got close and displayed near the feeding Red-tailed Hawk or dominant caracara when one was feeding. Display was also present next to Turkey Vulture waiting for its turn. Also, on one occasion young caracara shown an aggressive pose and made a short jump with raised wings and open bill towards a Turkey Vulture but lack of any reaction from the vulture ended this incident. It is also interesting to mention that on several occasions when a juvenile caracara started “Head-Throwback Display,” even far away from the carcass, and a dominant adult bird was in visible distance (again, even far away) the adult’s reaction was to immediately attack and chase away the displaying young bird. On several occasions those attacks ended up with a short confrontation in mid-air where the juvenile was rolling over with talons up

for protection. No chase ended up in a serious fight. The juvenile was sometimes resting on the ground taking a flattened, submissive posture when another aggressive caracara came closer. It often did not stop the aggressor from the chase. One of the reasons I was watching caracaras on the ground is the fact that we do not know if caracaras are anting or not. Also I observed caracaras feeding on the ground (insects?) they were walking and scratching dirt in the field around the carcass. Sometimes they raised their feet to look at them very carefully for several seconds. I could see no reason for this action.

To summarize what I was able to observe; the “Head-Throwback Display” occurred very often during a day, no matter what part of the day, and was performed by adults and juveniles to claim a territory or food; and/or when making aggressive/threatening posture near another feeding or waiting bird of a different species (juvenile White-tailed Hawk and Turkey Vultures in this case). Both caracara partners made that display immediately after copulation.



The Crested Caracara pair was often observed to feed together without conflict.
Photo by author



Juvenile Crested Caracara trying to pull away juvenile White-tailed Hawk from the coyote's carcass.

Photo by author

A few more notes on feeding:

With the exception of one breeding pair, the rest of single Crested Caracaras (including juvenile birds) were always feeding alone (coyote is small so there was not much room to access the carcass anyway). The most dominant bird on scene was eating the carcass and the other raptors were waiting (often impatiently) around. The most impatient bird on scene was a juvenile caracara who even sometimes was trying to grab a piece of carcass when a juvenile White-tailed Hawk was feeding. It was even circling around trying to gain access to the carcass when the hawk was spreading its wings to protect it, keeping its back to the caracara. One time it led to an interesting situation. After trying to access the carcass for a few minutes the juvenile caracara decided to grab a primary flight feather of the juvenile White-tailed Hawk's wing and started to pull it trying to pull away the hawk from the carcass. It did not succeed and after freeing its wing the hawk went back to feeding paying no attention to the caracara.

Another interesting moment occurred when after a long period of waiting for a pair of caracaras to stop feeding, the juvenile bird

decided to take action no matter what. It ruffled its feathers and in a begging crouched position, with head down and begging call started to run straight to the carcass. For a moment I was afraid that this might be a mistake but to my surprise both adults slowly walked away from the carcass. The juvenile, with its feathers still ruffled out, started feeding very rapidly. Another even bigger surprise was when the juvenile after a few moments of feeding, with the adults nearby, performed the "Head-Throwback Display" on the top of the carcass calling loudly. There was no reaction from the adults.

The Crested Caracara is a very interesting bird. More data should be collected for comparison to determine the precise meaning of the "Head-Throwback Display" and other behaviors.

Additional photographs illustrating the Crested Caracara "Head-Throwback Display", feeding on coyote carcass and interactions with other raptors can be found on this website: http://www.pbase.com/mbb/lrgv_dec_26_27_2006_caracara

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