

A Little Raven History



According to legend, ravens have lived on the White Hill (whereon stands the Tower of London) since King Bran's head was buried there, facing France, to protect England against invasion. Ravens gathered in great numbers at his burial place and have ever after refused to leave his side. Well, his head, strictly speaking.

curious raven fact
ONE

Bran is Welsh for “raven.”

curious raven fact
TWO

Gravestones in Britain
were once referred to as
“ravenstones.”

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A Little More Raven History



Charles II

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When Charles II was asked by his astronomer Flamsteed to rid the Tower and his observatory of ravens—the king nearly complied. Fortunately, however, luck and some good sense prevailed. An old seer warned the king that “the Tower, the Crown, and the very Kingdom” would fall if he harmed Bran’s ravens.

The warning must have had the desired effect.

Charles not only spared the great birds, but he also issued a royal decree stating that never were there to be fewer than six birds in the Tower of London, lest the safety of England be compromised. Other monarchs have followed suit.

Huzzah for the old naysayer!

curious raven fact
THIRTE

At the end of WWII, when much of London was rubble and ash, there was but ONE raven still alive in the Tower. I would humbly suggest that he was proof of how, in the final days of the war, the Allied victory hung by the narrowest of threads.

The raven's name, a testament to his tenacity, was "Grip."

curious raven fact
FOUR

It was rumored, but never proved, that one raven did not die of shock, illness, or injury during the London Blitz of WWII. Many Londoners believed that Raven Mabel was kidnapped by the enemy. We are never to know the truth of that tale, nor of Mabel's fate, for she was never found.

I, for one, would *look to the cats*.

curious raven fact
FIVE

Ravens at large are a protected species in Britain. According to Cornish folklore, the spirit of King Arthur is said to dwell in ravens. And why should it not? Is there a more worthy mortal vessel for so great a soul? I cannot conceive of one.

The Tower Ravens Today...



Today there are seven ravens in the Tower: the requisite six, and a spare. The fledglings reside in the home of the Ravenmaster (who is chosen from among the Yeoman Warders, also called Beefeaters) for six weeks, so that they might form a bond with him.

They are not pets, but enlisted military personnel kept at the expense of the Crown, and they are subject to dismissal.

Ravens have run of the grounds, but cannot fly, as each has one clipped wing. The clipping does NOT hurt, it simply unbalances the raven in flight—an unfortunate fact I am intimately familiar with. Ahem—well. Shall we go on to a few more curious facts?

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curious raven fact **SIX**

A Tower raven is fed six ounces of meat and biscuits soaked in blood every day.

Each also receives an egg from time to time, and sometimes a bit of cheese (I am proud to say I introduced that tradition).

curious raven fact **SEVEN**

Not all ravens are suited to service. Here are two disgraceful examples:

In 1981, a raven managed to escape the Tower, after twenty-one years of service. He was never recovered, but was known to frequent the Rose and Punchbowl Pub. His name, again quite fitting, was "Raven Grog."

It is the truth, upon my oath.

Raven George developed a taste for TV antennas. He was dismissed and banished to Wales (the Welsh are a good-natured people, I understand, but do not suffer raven shenanigans gladly). A special decree was issued: "On Saturday, 13th September, 1986, Raven George, enlisted 1975, was posted to the Welsh Mountain Zoo. Conduct unsatisfactory, service no longer required."

Good riddance to bad rubbish, I say.

One Last Raven Story



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Should you still harbor any uncertainty as to the cleverness and general good humor of ravens, I conclude with this story:

Raven James Crow was a beloved and long-lived denizen of the Tower. Upon his death, a mighty wailing rose up around his body, and great attention was lavished on the fallen Tower raven. Raven Edgar Sopper, observing this ado from a short distance, also promptly fell over—seemingly dead. The Ravenmaster, overcome with grief at the loss of two Tower ravens, leaned down to take Edgar Sopper into his arms. At that very moment, the raven abandoned his deceit, with much good humor. Raven Edgar then “flapped off, croaking huge raven laughs” at his fine joke.

Test Your Raven Knowledge in this
TRUE OR FALSE QUIZ

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How Well Do YOU Know

RAVENS?

A True or False Quiz

ANSWER KEY

1. Ravens mate for life. **True** **False**

2. Ravens can live up to 100 years. **True** **False**

3. When a raven dies at the Tower, the other ravens have been known to hold a "raven funeral" where they gather and clack and cry and caw for up to twenty-four hours. **True** **False**

4. Ravens are great mimics and can imitate the human voice, a whistling teapot, and even a dog's bark. **True** **False**

5. Ravens are among the most playful of the bird species and have been observed sliding down snow banks purely for fun. **True** **False**

6. The demise of the Hapsburgs (powerful rulers of the Holy Roman Empire) began when they had all ravens in their ancestral Schloss (Castle) Hapsburg slaughtered. This was the beginning of the famous Hapsburg Curse. **True** **False**

7. Charles Dickens had a pet raven named Grip. **True** **False**

8. Ravens have never been successfully bred in captivity. **True** **False**

9. Ravens are the official national bird of England. **True** **False**

10. When a Tower raven dies, he or she is buried in the Raven Cemetery in a dried moat near St. Thomas Tower. The headstone lists all ravens buried there since 1956. **True** **False**

ANSWER KEY

How Well Do YOU Know RAVENS?



1. Ravens mate for life. True False

Young birds may travel in flocks, but adults mate for life.

2. Ravens can live up to 100 years. True False

The average lifespan of a raven in the wild is 10 to 15 years; they have been known to live up to 45 years while in captivity.

3. When a raven dies at the Tower, the other ravens have been known to hold a "raven funeral" where they gather and clack and cry and caw for up to twenty-four hours. True False

4. Ravens are great mimics and can imitate the human voice, a whistling teapot, and even a dog's bark. True False

5. Ravens are among the most playful of the bird species and have been observed sliding down snow banks purely for fun. True False

6. The demise of the Hapsburgs (powerful rulers of the Holy Roman Empire) began when they had all ravens in their ancestral Schloss (Castle) Hapsburg slaughtered. This was the beginning of the famous Hapsburg Curse. True False

7. Charles Dickens had a pet raven named Grip. True False

And, yes, he bears the same name as the stalwart fellow who endured the WWII bombings.

8. Ravens have never been successfully bred in captivity. True False

In 1987, the Tower began a breeding program. Their first pair of ravens, Charlie and Rhys, produced a total of seventeen chicks.

9. Ravens are the official national bird of England. True False

England has no national bird. The country did adopt an *unofficial* national bird in the 1960s, the European Robin.

10. When a Tower raven dies, he or she is buried in the Raven Cemetery in a dried moat near St. Thomas Tower. The headstone lists all ravens buried there since 1956. True False

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HERE ARE SOME SOURCES WHERE YOU CAN FIND OUT MORE ABOUT THE
TOWER RAVENS

Websites:

<http://www.hrp.org.uk/TowerOfLondon/stories/theravens>

<http://www.historic-uk.com/DestinationsUK/TowerRavens.htm>

http://www.forteantimes.com/features/articles/879/myths_of_the_raven.html

Books:

CROWS AND RAVENS by James V. Bradley. Chelsea Clubhouse, 2006.

TALES FROM THE TOWER: SECRETS AND STORIES FROM A GORY AND GLORIOUS PAST. Think Books, 2007.

TOWER OF LONDON: ENGLAND'S GHOSTLY CASTLE (CASTLES, PALACES & TOMBS) by Gail Blasser Riley. Bearport Publishing, 2006.

THE TOWER OF LONDON: PAST AND PRESENT by Geoffrey Parnell. The History Press, 2009.