

Aero Ravens

by Russell Bennett

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I have just returned from hiking up a mountain. It was a beautiful day. The sky was blue and cloudless, with air so clear that mountains 100 miles away looked smaller but no less sharp than the one I was on. I am in southern Colorado on business and had the day off so I decided to head to the mountains. I started hiking in the morning from an altitude of about 9500 ft. I climbed through groves of aspen at the peak of their fall color, a brilliant golden yellow. Higher up the aspens gave way to the spruce trees, with an aroma that was fresh and sweet. At several places on the way up I had passed what would have been fantastic slope soaring sights. The wind, although not strong, was blowing straight in and it looked like the lift would have been smooth and strong. A guess I need to get to work on a packable slope soarer.

Eventually I was above tree line, with only short, dry grass growing in patches between the rocks. I finally reached the peak. I was at 13,400 ft and had a view that was breathtaking. But most amazing of all was that I had discovered the playground of the birds.

The birds were ravens, all black like a crow but slightly larger, and there were about 20 of them. I had been watching them for a little while when one of them did what appeared to be a roll. I thought that I must have been mistaken. I have often wondered if birds ever did aerobatics, and of course I have read "Jonathan Livingston Seagull." Never having seen it though, I figured that birds must lack the motivation to try. So I continued to watch and a little while later another bird did a roll, and then another. A bird would be flying along fairly fast when it would quickly fold its wings almost completely closed, then around it would go in an axial roll, opening its wings immediately when it was back upright. Watching carefully, I could see one set of tip feathers go up and the other set go down. These relatively large deflections combined with the greatly reduced wingspan made for a pretty fast roll rate.

It was fascinating to watch individual birds for a while and see the different flying styles and personalities. It was just like when a large group of us get together for a day of flying. There were the floaters. These birds would fly around with their wings fully spread and their legs hanging down acting as air brakes so that they wouldn't pick up too much speed. There were the slightly more adventurous types who would zoom around some and occasionally try a roll. Sometimes they would roll inverted smoothly but then lose their cool or maybe their orientation and start opening their wings when they were still upside down. This would make them flop back upright, sometimes completing the roll and sometimes rotating back in the direction they had come. And then there were the hot rodders. Chasing each other around the sky, doing high G turns, and performing clean axial rolls. Sometimes they would even do 2-point rolls, pausing for a second while inverted.

It was time for me to start heading down when I saw the speed demon. I watched him for a while and he was always flying fast. I never once saw him fully spread his wings or fly slowly. The final to his performance was a high speed dive with two rolls in a row followed by a pullout

500 ft. below me and then a big sweeping climb back almost to my height. I was amazed. So now I knew. Yes, birds can and will teach themselves aerobatics if they have the opportunity, which means a place where they can fly for hours with no one to bother them and lots of smooth strong lift. I can't wait to get back up in the mountains.