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FACILITY DRILL

Blog - 2014 - March

Crows

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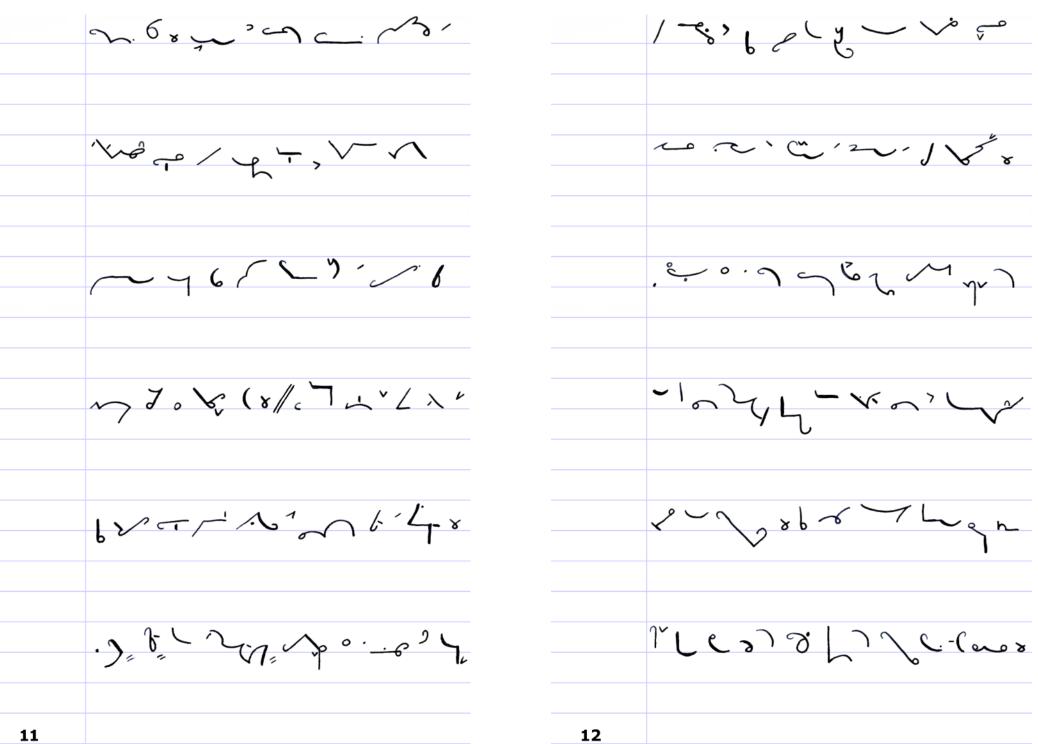
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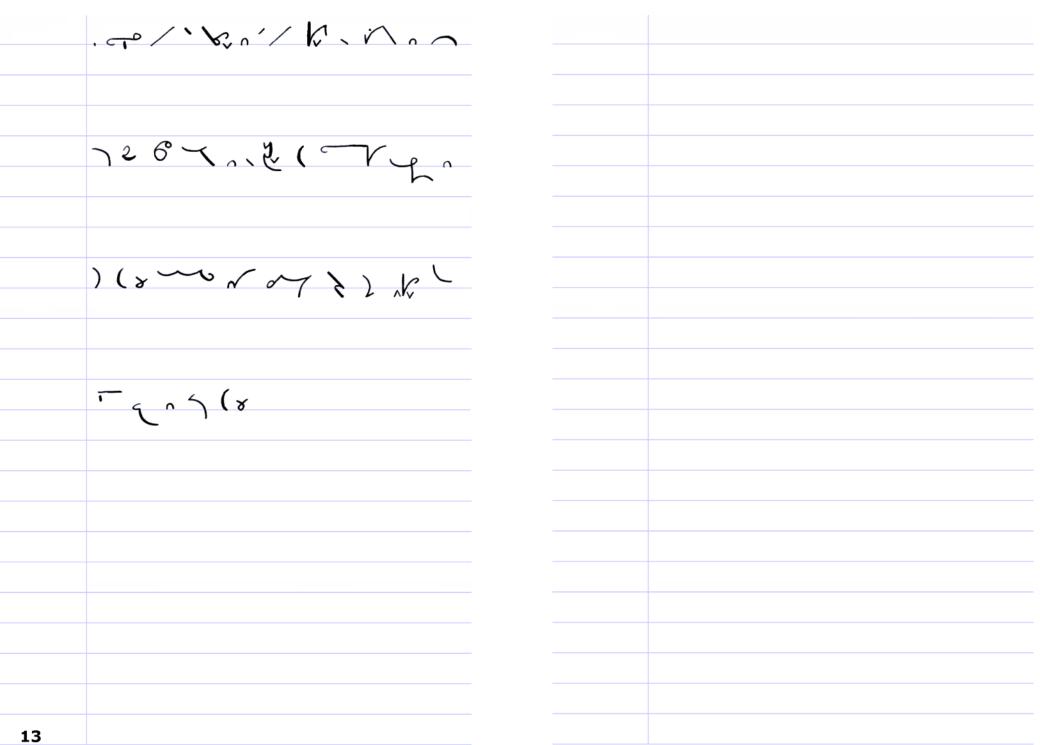
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The other day I went to Danson Park in Bexleyheath to check out the progress of the spring weather on the ornamental gardens. Unfortunately there were no flowers to photograph, but everything was neat and tidy, with the roses pruned and the beds covered in a grass mulch. I looked instead for other interesting features, such as the twisted wisteria stems on the brick and beam pergola. and checked up on the lily pond, which was now clear of the clogging duckweed. However, the woodland daffodil area further along was in full bloom and the sun shining through the trees and illuminating all the yellow trumpets made for some cheerful photos at last.

I wandered down to the rock and bog garden area at the far end of the park. where there are more trees and a secluded duck pond that flows into the lake. On the approach path, I noticed some crows digging in a muddy patch. looking for an easy meal. I threw them some bread, to entice them closer to get some good photos. The pieces had hardly hit the ground before more crows started wheeling in, landing with a bounce and their loud caws advertising the situation to all and sundry. I moved over to a grassy area between the trees, a few yards from the path, where they would not be disturbed by people walking by and where they might feel safer and more inclined to come nearer. A few more morsels sailing through the air attracted the attention of even more crows, and within a minute or two there were at least thirty of them spread around me in an arc, and increasing all the time. Although taking photos and movies was the aim, I found it more interesting to watch them "live" than peer at them on the camera screen.

They are big, bold and brash, with a swaggering walk and impudent raucous calls, but there did seem to be an invisible line that they would not cross, at a certain distance between them and me. It was amusing to see them approaching this boundary, sometimes stopping

within inches of the bread, and vacillating between lunging forward towards the bread and pulling back without having got it. They were too attracted by the food to retreat and not brave enough to get those few inches nearer. The boldest one would eventually make a daring dash for the piece and jump back as quickly as possible, as if on a piece of elastic - but only just back over the line, so as not to miss the next opportunity. I thought they might come closer if I sat down on the bench, but then I could not fling it as far. I tried the ruse of standing, in my darkcoloured clothes, with my back to a tree trunk or some greenery so as not to present such a tall threatening appearance and I think that if I had done this from the outset, it might have worked better.

Whenever the bread disappeared in the grass, then they seemed to consider that the effort of finding it was not worth the risk of missing the next piece. If it was bigger and more visible, that seemed to bring out more bravery and determination. However, it was certainly not "out of sight, out of mind", as when I stepped back, the whole crowd moved in to investigate and clear up, as they would normally do when visitors leave the park benches after eating their snacks. I wondered whether it was the crows' different personalities that influenced the risks they were willing to take, or perhaps it was just the hungriest ones who made the most efforts. Bigger pieces drew greater courage from them, as the large size of the prize began to outweigh the danger, although the successful claimant of the big chunk had the additional problem of keeping it to himself. The safest place to deal with the meal was up in a tree, with the lump firmly underfoot and devoured crumb by crumb. Quite a few of the crows had stationed themselves on the lower branches, to get a better view of proceedings, and when I threw some pieces upwards in their direction, they paid much more attention and could often be lured into following the piece to the ground.

Crows

There are always one or two crows about where I live, although they never come into the garden, and a fair number in the nearby parks. Some days people's generosity with the bread exceeds the hunger of the ducks and geese, and I am sure the crows do a good job of clearing away the remains, after everyone has gone home. I did once see one struggling with a hard dry crust and really wanted to see him drop it in the water nearby so that he could eat it, but that did not happen, unfortunately. But if he had, I am sure he would have been smart enough to remember what to do another time, and I think it likely that the others would have learned from him as well. Knowing what clever guick learners and opportunists crows are, next time I go to the park I will be looking into those little black eves and wondering just how much intelligence is behind them.

When I got home I checked up on the differences between crow, rook, raven and the similar chough and jackdaw. The British Trust for Ornithology website has an excellent short video which explains all the differences used for identification, in their appearance, cries and calls, manner of flying and walking, and general behaviour. The narrator has a very clear voice and if you wanted to try vour hand at some ornithological dictation, I give below some of the vocabulary to use in preparation. It is mostly natural talking speed, but you could try doing several words or phrases at a time, or perhaps every other sentence. The crows are all behind you and are delighted to help you improve your shorthand, as well as enable you to identify them correctly next time you see them. In any event, you will certainly be able to see the outline for "caw" whenever you hear them. (1044 words)