



Crested Cara Cara

Ink Free # 8

July, 2024

The "Mexican Eagle," a falcon species, ranges up as far into the United States as southern Arizona. We now know this truth after discovering what the birding photographers have known for years: they nest next to Arizona Highway 86, near Tucson. I have seen them near Eloy, in Southern Texas, and Costa Rica, but never so close.

My geology buddy texted me asking if I wanted to photograph a bird's nest. Sure, I said, gathering my long lens and stray enthusiasm. He travels on AZ 86 several times weekly to practice with his antique black powder rifles at the Three Points range. He noted a covey of photographers along the road and saw a nest. We went to investigate.



Best known as the Crested Cara Cara, these large birds eat almost anything from road kill to live lizards and baby birds. Their reputation is sort of like the Rambo of the Raptor world: aggressive and brutal. Significant in size and willing to take on the bigger buzzards for food, their magnificent bright orange beak, white face crested black and beautiful plumage, this raptor demands awe and no doubt respect.



This part of the Arizona Sonora Desert is Saguaro sparse, with only a few mesquites and IronWood trees above the cholla dominating the desert floor. Harsh land, just ask the coyotes. The birds built a massive nest among the arms of a saguaro about 30 meters from the dirt side road. Two additional Saguaro, one about a kilometer north, and a second "crested" Saguaro 200 meters south of the highway. We arrived at 8 am, which was apparently a bit late. According to the photographers packing up for the morning, we missed several feedings by the adults to three sizable chicks. Left alone, we really did not know if this was an owl nest or what.



We snapped a few photos and left for breakfast at a nearby café. Chimping our camera, the large hooked beaks did not look right to be an owl. Later, thanks to a good friend, we learned this is a Cara Cara nest, and most folks have photographed the spring chick-raising event for five or more years.

I returned several more times, several times with my daughter and my long-time geology buddy. Feeding started with an adult perched on one of the distant Saguaros, leaving and dipping down low to emerge at the nest with beaks full of food. Once, we witnessed both adults and the three chicks in the low morning light.



We met and friended some lovely people, all snapping away with thousands of dollars of new cameras and long and longer lenses. Only once did we encounter a rude person with no photo etiquette or presence of anyone other than him. Now we have new contacts, pledges to meet again, and plans of finding or sharing other sites and good times. By the end of May, the chicks had left the nest.

Experts reminded us that the family stays close for about three more months, teaching the chicks to hunt and survive. What a treat. Wait until next year.

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Pondering along in old age without fear, excepting what I can do
Enjoying every minute of it!