

Species Profile...

The Resplendent Blue Jay

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“I see some feathers of a blue jay scattered along a wood-path, and at length come to the body of the bird. What a neat and delicately ornamented creature, finer than any work of art in a lady's boudoir....”

Henry David Thoreau, *Journal*, 1858

Were it not such a common backyard bird, the blue jay would be one of the most sought after birds for bird watchers. Few birds can match its plumage for eye-catching color. No bird can surpass its clever behaviors nor its distinctive vocalizations.

Yet, the blue jay is so common that people hardly pay it notice. Too bad. It's an exceptional creature, worthy of our singular attention.

The scientific name for the blue jay is made up of two perfectly descriptive words: *Cyanocitta*, meaning blue-jay, and *cristata*, meaning crested. The blue jay and its cousin in the west, the Stellar's Jay (*Cyanocitta stelleri*), are the only North American jays with a crest.

Blue jays are in the Corvidae family of birds, which includes 20 North American species such as crows, ravens, and magpies. Bluish colored Corvids like the blue jay are unique to the New World. In the Old World, Corvids such as jackdaws and rooks are merely black or sooty gray.

Like all Corvids, blue jays are among the largest of all birds in the Passeriformes or perching bird order. For instance, blue jays are slightly larger than mockingbirds and robins, and have stouter bills and longer

legs.

The azure-blue feathering on a blue jay is spectacular, and there's no difference in coloration between the male and female. Wavy black bars traverse the wings and tail, a prominent white bar offsets the side of the wings, and conspicuous white spots decorate the wing and tail. A black band circles the neck and extends up behind a rich, violet-blue crest.

Thoreau was right to describe the bird as “delicately ornamented.”

What he might not have known is that the blue feathers are not truly blue because bluish pigmentation does not exist in bird feathers. The blue in jays and all bluish toned birds comes from the refraction of light waves by tiny melanin particles in a layer of cells on the feather's surface. Kind of like a prism. But even if a blue jay's display of ornate blue is an artifice of light, its noisy calls are genuine. The raucous *jay-jay-jay* or *thief-thief-thief* call is the daily tell-tale signal of jays in my own backyard.

Thoreau characterized the blue jay's call as a “steel cold scream,” but I wouldn't go that far. The bird actually has a variety of complex vocalizations, some of which are quite musical like the resonant *tull-ull* call that sounds like bell tones. And

there are the melodic whistling notes that sound like *teekle-teekle-teekle*.

Blue jays are master mimics of other bird calls, and their rendition of a red-shouldered hawk's shrieking *keer-yuuu* call is good enough to fool even experienced bird watchers.

I think the blue jays in my backyard issue the call of a red-shouldered hawk simply to scare off other birds from the birdseed. Blue jays are clever, if not downright smart. Measuring or defining intelligence in birds---and humans---is tricky. Still, blue jays and all Corvids behave in ways that indicate adaptability, memory, and problem solving---things that suggest a smart brain.

For example, blue jays can readily adapt to urban environments from their traditional pine-oak forests. They routinely cache food beneath tree bark or in the ground and remember the location for retrieval as necessary.

I do well to remember where the butter is in the refrigerator.

Scientific experiments have shown that blue jays can develop better problem solving strategies for finding food than can cats and monkeys. I've witnessed one of their clever food-finding strategies: they follow my wife around as she weeds her flowerbeds, waiting for her to uncover worms and beetles in the dirt.

The birds can capitalize on almost any food source, which is one reason for their adaptability to human habitations. Their eclectic diet may lead them to raid other bird nests for the eggs or, even worse, the baby birds. Fortunately, such meals aren't too frequent among blue jays.

They're primarily vegetarians, preferring a diet of nuts, fruits, grains, and seeds. They can utilize the lower mandible of their heavy bill as a chisel to crack open acorns and peanuts. But jays will eat just about anything, and they aggressively go after insects such as caterpillars, grasshoppers, and beetles. I've even seen them feast on a discarded bag of potato chips. It was barbeque-flavored chips, too, which is further evidence of blue jay intelligence.

The birds express moods with their crest. An aggressive jay raises its crest to form a prominent peak like a war bonnet on its crown. A quiescent jay feeding with its family lowers its crest to form a ruffled look like a French beret on its crown.

Blue jays hang out in family groups and guard each other when foraging for food. One or two birds will perch on an overhanging tree limb and keep a lookout for predators like hawks or cats. If they spot a predator, they'll let forth their shrill thief-thief-thief alarm call and band together to mob the predator. Or at least make such a strident noise that every bird in the vicinity will know a predator is out and about.

The range of blue jays extends over the eastern half of North America from Canada to Texas. The birds are non-migratory, but the northern most populations do retreat south in the winter. That's why southern residential backyards may have a few more jays in the winter than in the summer.

Thoreau, the ever joyous bird watcher, said, "It is the more glorious to live in Concord because the jay is so splendidly painted." Well, Mr. Thoreau, the resplendent blue jay makes residential living glorious, too.

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