

Blue Jay

(*Cyanocitta cristata*)



Blue Jays are common throughout much of eastern and central North America.

Their populations were decreasing when logging was rampant in the United States but now the Blue Jay population is considered 'stable' and of "least concern." Blue Jays are adaptable.

Once abundant chiefly in oak forests and mixed oak and conifer forest edges, Blue Jays are now also common in populated areas such as city parks and residential yards. They continue to expand their range east of the Rockies and can now be found from southern Canada to the Gulf of Mexico.

Most Blue Jays do not migrate south during the winter. However, regardless

of whether they live as far north as Canada or as far south as Florida, up to 20% of an area's population will migrate further south in the winter and will often be replaced by Blue Jays migrating south from further north. The same individual birds do not migrate each year but scientists do not know why some birds will migrate one year but not the next. Blue Jays migrate in large loose flocks during the day but they do not necessarily migrate to the same area each year.

Blue Jays are one of the most easily recognized birds. They are bright blue on top with white wing bars on their blue wings and black bands on their wings and on their white tipped blue tails. They have a blue crest that they can raise and lower at will to communicate with each other. They raise their crest when they are on alert and lower it when they are relaxed or eating. Blue jays of all ages go through a period each year when they lose all the feathers on their head and appear

bald for about a week. Their feathers are not really blue but refract light in a way that makes them appear blue. Blue Jays have a white face with a black “necklace” and black beak and eyes. Their belly is gray/white. They are large for a songbird. Adults are twelve inches long with a seventeen inch wing span. Although males and females look alike, males are slightly larger. Juveniles are duller than adults.

Blue Jays are also easily recognized by their loud raucous call to warn of predators and to defend their territory. They have a rich variety of other calls; they screech and make clear whistling notes, gurgling sounds and musical chirping. They are known to commonly do a very close imitation of the red-shouldered hawk’s and the red-tailed hawk’s screams and have, occasionally, learned to imitate other birds, such as crows and bald eagles. Blue jays in captivity have imitated human speech and cat’s meows.

Jays belong to the Corvid Family, along with ravens, crows, and magpies. They are some of the most intelligent birds. Blue Jays are able to recognize humans and remember them. They can anticipate problems and problem solve. They communicate and cooperate with each other. They are aggressive and fearless in defending their nests and territory and regularly join together to mob intruders and drive them away. Hawks, owls, and falcons are their natural enemies. Nestlings also fall prey to squirrels, raccoons, opossum, cats, snakes, and crows.

Jays are omnivorous. They eat nuts, seeds, fruit, insects, snails, frogs, birds’ eggs. and sometimes small rodents and even baby birds. However, Blue Jays prefer acorns, shelled or whole peanuts, corn, and sunflower seeds. Because of their habit of caching acorns in the fall for winter enjoyment, Blue Jays are credited with spreading oak trees throughout their range. Blue Jays will readily come to backyard

feeders, especially those with suet or some of their favorite foods. They prefer large open feeders or platform feeders. When Blue Jays flock a feeder, they chase smaller birds away and, thus, have earned the reputation of being bullies. To discourage Blue Jays from dominating your feeder, install smaller feeders without perches and avoid peanuts, sunflower seeds, and corn.

Blue Jays have a complex social system and a unique courtship ritual. A group of six to ten males will gather around a female high in the tree top. After a while the female will take a brief flight around the area and the males will follow her, clamoring and calling. When she lands on a different tree, they will gather around her again. Then the males will take turns making high whistling sounds while bobbing their heads up and down until one bird bows out by assuming a submissive posture and ruffling his feathers before flying away. The process is repeated until only one bird remains. The remaining male then brings the

female a gift of food or building materials. The couple is mated for life and they stay together foraging, flying, and raising their young. They also bring each other gifts throughout their lifetime. The average lifespan of a Blue Jay is seven years but individuals have occasionally lived seventeen years.

In Florida, nesting season is March through September. Florida Blue Jays usually have two to three broods per year while northern Blue Jays usually have just one. Both the male and female build their nest together; however the male does most of the foraging and the female does most of the building. The nest is open cup shaped made from twigs, grasses, weeds, lichen, and mud and tucked in a fork of branches ten to twenty-five feet off the ground. The female then lays four to six greenish eggs with brown spots. The female incubates the eggs while the male supplies her food. The eggs hatch in sixteen to eighteen days and both parents feed the chicks. Older sibling

Blue Jays also assist in raising the young. The chicks fledge in seventeen to twenty-one days but continue to be fed and cared for by the parents and older siblings for another month.

The bond between the mated couple and their offspring is strong. They communicate and cooperate as they live in a loose flock together. If a mate dies, the partner will visibly mourn. He will display a drooping posture and listless behavior and shed real tears!

Sometimes the flock will gather above the dead bird, cawing and keening.

When a baby dies, the parents also mourn and stay near the dead baby for long periods of time.