

THE OUTLAW BIRD ★ BLUE JAY

Hated. Despised. Weed bird. The blue jay is just another species on our seemingly endless list of “vermin”. Why?

HATE, LET US COUNT THE WAYS

How has a beautiful, intelligent and helpful (!) bird become a trash bird to so many? Not everyone has always viewed the blue jay in this way, as is illustrated by the poem on the following page. Cornell’s Birds of North America online says the blue jay “offers excitement and fascination to those who observe it closely.”

One serious complaint I’ve heard about the blue jay is that it is a pecan stealer. I know someone who engages jays in battle every year during gardening and pecan season. I was kind of proud of him this past year when he actually put out plastic snakes and scarecrows and hung cds in an effort to keep them and the crows away.

Unfortunately, not all the blue jays got the point. Let’s just say they won’t be back.

One common complaint is that blue jays are obnoxious; scaring away other birds from our feeders. Blue jays certainly are not bashful, but in my experience, they hardly keep my other birds from feeding. Also on the positive side, I have yet to see a blue jay come close to being as obnoxious as some people I know.

Blue jays avoided my feeders until I started putting out a seed mix containing corn. They come and get their corn as the other birds go about their business.

Blue jays are purported to be egg and nestling snatchers. Out of 530 stomachs analyzed, only 6 were found to have “traces of bird eggs and nestlings.” (F. E. L. Beal 1922. Some common birds useful to the farmer. U.S.D.A. Farmers’ Bull. 630.)

This reputation as egg and young stealer has been exacerbated by some who have studied them. One implicating study from 1985 failed to provide direct

evidence. Interestingly, some studies have used artificial nests, which may not provide a realistic behavior model. Blue jays do quickly associate people with food and such a study practice may warp the result.

The Cornell Lab of Ornithology says the subject of the blue jay as nest predator needs further study.

Some people think that blue jays scare all the smaller birds out of an area. Blue jays are territorial only to the extent of protecting the nest; they aren’t preventing other birds from inhabiting an area.

Some gardeners claim that blue jays peck tomatoes, others claim to have no problems with them. Some gardeners say that having a birdbath seems to cut down on the number of tomato pecks, because some birds are just after the moisture. Also, blue jays apparently eat hornworms, which themselves can eat all the tomatoes in a patch. Just something of which to be mindful.

Well, the blue jay just sounds irritating, some may say. Even I might admit this is true sometimes, but surprisingly the blue jay has a vast repertoire of calls. A blue jay is more than just another harsh “jay jay jay”. Thank goodness.

ELEGANT COMMUNICATOR

The blue jay has a large variety of calls which experts theorize are used in communicating with one another. Some of these calls include: the well-known hawk imitation; the “squeaky gate” which I find sounds more like a squeaky pump handle; the bell call, an



alarm call often used when humans approach, which is “clear, liquid” according to BNA; clucking or jrirt calls used among pairs; rattle calls which sound like a purring cat; peep call given by the “female a few days before egg laying”; whisper song which according to BNA is “Soft, quiet conglomeration of clicks, chucks, whirrs, whines, liquid notes, and elements of other calls...” similar to that of a gray catbird or even American robin, and given when the blue jay is alone.

The author of *The Singing Life of Birds* (Donald Kroodsma) found the blue jay even has several and maybe endless variations of many calls. He believes that they have a sophisticated language, that is “highly structured.” Like others who have studied the blue jay he finds them to be some of the most intelligent birds.

WHAT GOOD ARE THEY?

Many university pest management programs consider the blue jay to be a helper bird. Blue jays eat various insects, many of which are considered pests. Because blue jays are adept at cracking nuts, they are able to eat Japanese beetles, which are too hard for many birds. They also eat the larvae of many pests such as tent caterpillars, brown

tailed moths, and Japanese beetles.

Blue jays aid in forest regeneration when they fail to retrieve acorns and nuts cached under the ground. Former Virginia Polytechnic Institute biology professor, W.Carter Johnson and ornithologist Curtis Adkisson along with U.S. Forest Service employees have all studied the ecological role of blue jays.

Johnson says that after the Ice Age, blue jays probably regenerated the Northern oak and beech forests. USFS studies are showing that our modern day blue jays are helping reconnect fragmented forests. Unlike squirrels (a recognized tree planter), Blue jays have been proven to fly up to almost 3 miles with seeds, spurring a replanting of major ecological significance.

This seed hoarding also benefits small mammals such as chipmunks.

A western cousin of the blue jay, the pinon jay, is credited with being the primary factor in regenerating Pinon pine forests in the Mojave. This jay has been shown to fly seeds up to 6 miles one way.

OK, BUT...MY PECAN TREES?!

Truly, this is a subject I'd rather avoid. After watching the efforts of my previously mentioned acquaintance, I know my advice is pretty much useless. My theory is, "Let them have some pecans, for heavens sake."

Though he always has more than enough pecans, he insists that if he lets too many of them take the nuts that he won't have any left. He may be right.

Blue jays do vastly more good than harm, but this probably isn't much comfort to pecan growers. The North Carolina Coop Extension Service says that short of locating the orchard away from wooded areas, the best control is commercial noisemakers that sound like gunfire.

For noisemakers to be effective, they need to be moved occasionally, so birds don't become too familiar with them. Also, there is the issue of locating them near a power source or finding one that runs on fuel.

The Texas Agricultural Extension Service has this to say, about pecan trees found in cities "To reduce this

loss, landscape pecan trees need to be harvested as soon as the shucks open. Long PVC pipe or fishing poles can be used to thrash the nuts from the trees when the shucks open in early November. The blue jays and squirrels will show you when the pecans are ready. If you do not harvest with haste, they can and will consume the entire crop."

Those who need to get rid of some pecans can take comfort, I suppose. And if you want to attract blue jays, it's a positive. But for many, it is no consolation.

The blue jay's ability to roll with the punches of human activity is the reason it has flourished even as many other animals get squeezed out. This is considered an admirable trait when found in humans...not so much in blue jays.

-Anita Smith, Editor
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Why Should You Care about Blue Jays?

Pest Control

Blue jays eat adult Japanese beetles, according to several university pest management programs. They also eat larvae of bugs considered pests, such as tent caterpillar, brown tailed moth and Japanese beetles. Many gardeners say they also eat hornworms.

Tree planters

Blue jays are major forest regenerators.

Beautiful and Entertaining

In a world of disappearing species, this bird has adapted and provides the gift of wonder to anyone interested; no trekking required. Scientific studies have proven the blue jay intelligent.

The Blue Jay

His eye is bright as burnished steel,
His note a quick defiant cry;
Harsh as a hinge his grating squeal
Sounds from the keen wind sweeping by.
Rains never dim his smooth blue coat,
The winter never troubles him.
No fog puts hoarseness in his throat,
Or makes his merry eyes grow dim.
His cry at morning is a shout,
His wing is subject to his heart.
Of fear he knows not - doubt
Did not draw his sailing-chart.
He is an universal emigre ;
His foot is set in every land.
He greets me by gray Casco bay,
And laughs across the Texas sand.
In heat or cold, in storm or sun
He lives unfearely, and when he dies
He folds his feet up one by one
And turns a last look at the skies.
He is the true American ! he fears
No journey and no wood or wall ;
And in the desert, toiling voyagers
Take heart of courage from his call.

-Hamlin Garland,

Through the Year with Birds and Poets

by Sarah Williams, 1900.

Male blue jays do most of the feeding of nestlings and of the female when she incubates.

Female is probably only one to incubate the eggs.

Blue jay migratory behavior is a mystery as is the social system of the birds.