

# Unsure about blue jays at bird feeders

All of you who have bird feeders in the backyard are familiar with this experience: the unwelcomed gougers.

Among the marauders that pilage our feeders are red squirrels, gray squirrels, chipmunks, crows and pigeons. Even the "guaranteed" squirrel-proof feeders are vulnerable.

There is, however, one that visits which falls into a gray area when it comes to whether it is welcomed or not. It is the blue jay.

It's a pretty bird, noisy, and borders on a scavenger.

It is also known for its aggressiveness and ruthlessness, being assertive toward other birds and



chasing them from feeders or other food sources, although this occurs much less often than it is blamed for. It can be beneficial to other species as well, as it may chase predatory birds, such as hawks and owls which occasionally feed on jays, and will scream if it sees a predator within its territory. It has also been known to sound an alarm call when hawks or other dangers are near, and smaller birds often recognize this call and hide themselves away accordingly.

It may also be aggressive towards humans who come close to its nest, and, if an owl roosts near the nest during the daytime, blue jays will mob it until it takes a new roost.

The male blue jay measures 9-12 inches in length and weighs 3-1/2 ounces. There is a pronounced crest on the head, a crown of feathers, which may be raised or lowered according to the bird's mood. When excited or aggressive, the crest may be fully raised. When frightened, the crest bristles outwards, brushlike. When the bird is feeding among other jays or resting, the crest is flattened to the head.

Males and females are nearly identical except that males are slightly larger.

Blue jays, *Cyanocitta cristata*, can make a large variety of sounds, and individuals may vary perceptibly in their calling style. Like other corvids, they may learn to mimic humans speech. Blue jays can also copy the cries of local hawks so well it is sometimes difficult to tell which it is. Their voice is typical of most jays in being varied, but the most commonly recognized sound is the alarm call, which is a loud, almost gull-like scream.

There is also a high-pitched jayer-jayer call that increases in speed as the bird becomes more agitated. This particular call can be easily confused with the chickadee's song because of the slow starting *chick-ah-dee-ee*. Blue jays will use these calls to band together to mob potential predators such as hawks and drive them away from the jays' nests.

The Blue jay is a moderately slow flier (20-25 mph) when unprovoked, and is easy prey for hawks and owls, when it flies in open lands.

Its food is sought both on the ground and in trees and includes virtually all known types of plant and animal sources, such as acorns and beech mast, weed seeds, grain, fruits and other berries, peanuts, bread, meat, small invertebrates of many types, scraps in town parks, bird-table food and rarely eggs and nestlings.

Jays are some of the more intelligent birds. They will wait and watch for a person to put food down and as soon as the person walks away they will swoop down to steal it. Along with crows, jays will also watch a person planting seed crops and afterwards dig up and eat the seeds.

They are very territorial birds, and they will chase others from a feeder for an easier meal. The Blue jay has a bad reputation as a raider of other birds' nests, stealing eggs, chicks, and nests. However, this may not be as widespread as is typically thought.

Like the crow, blue jays playfully snatch brightly colored or reflective objects, such as bottle caps or pieces of aluminum foil, and carry them around until they lose interest. The crows horde such items.

In old African-American folklore of the southern United States, the Blue jay was held to be a servant of the devil, and was not encountered on a Friday as he was fetching sticks down to Hell; furthermore, he was so happy and chirpy on a Saturday as he was relieved to return from Hell.

The Blue jay: friend or foe. It's a smart bird, but comes with a bad reputation.

**Roland's trivia question of the week:**

Name the only major league team that displays a player's number on one sleeve, in addition to the usual placement on the back of the uniform.

Answer on page 15.

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by Roland D. Hallee

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