

THE INSCRUTABLE BLUE JAY

The blue jay is one of the most visually-stunning and ecologically valuable birds in all of North America. Yet, he is widely maligned.

Known for ransacking neighboring nests and terrorizing songbirds, he has earned a bad reputation.

Probably due, in some measure, to Robert Havell's popular engraving of three blue jays attacking a Baltimore Oriole's nest and devouring the eggs (plate #102) in John Audubon's *Birds of America*, the blue jay is regarded as a "bully" and predator.

I am an unabashed fan of the blue jay. His complex character and secret life intrigue me.

Ever since moving into our Rockingham County Virginia home two years ago, I have been catering to the jays at our edge-of-the-woods bird feeding station behind the house. I give them peanuts and other special treats. People are puzzled when I speak of my fondness for jays. Understandably.

At a recent gathering, several acquaintances and I were discussing the wide-ranging variety of birds that were visiting our backyard feeders. Overhearing our conversation, an otherwise gracious woman screwed up her face and squawked: "I hate those blue jays! All they do is chase the other birds away."

Swooping in from high in the treetops, a *jeering* jay scatters a dozen or so songbirds assembled at our feeder as I watch from a window. He pauses a moment to survey his realm and strut his plumage, then stuffs his mouth with sunflower seeds and darts off to dine alone on a private perch.

Rather than sharing the seeds and nuts at the feeding station with fellow blue jays, he attacks and drives

them off as well. A me-first, king-of-the-hill disposition seems to prevail.

Historians report that in early 19th and 20th century rural America, the blue jay was actively hunted as a pest. Flocks of jays routinely swept through farmlands, feasting on agricultural crops of peas, sweet potatoes, and fruit trees and pillaging corn cribs. A cash bounty was paid on each bird killed. Farmers shot them by the hundreds.

Conversely, I find that jays connect me to the natural world. As I am drawn into their antics, time slows down and a curious sense of kinship alights in my soul.

Far above the confines of man-made boundaries, birds are free to wing and soar. I am earthbound. Yet as my eyes track their flight, my imagination escapes confinement and climbs skyward.

The earth recedes and old assumptions fall away. Anything is possible.

Sharing the taxonomic family name Corvidae with crows, ravens, and magpies, the blue jay is known for his superior intelligence and problem-solving ability. One manifestation of his intellect is his extensive repertoire of songs and calls.

Ironically, one of his more raucous calls sounds much like, “thief, thief, thief!”

Capable of replicating the calls of red-tailed hawks, red-shouldered hawks and Cooper’s hawks (all songbird predators), the jay appears to employ his voice mimicry skills to scare off the smaller birds who are fearful of becoming raptor lunch.

Blue Jays are opportunistic feeders: Omnivores. The black bears of the avian world. Audubon’s *Guide to North American Birds* claims that the blue jay’s diet

consists primarily (up to 75%) of vegetable matter: acorns, beechnuts, various seeds, grain, field crops, berries, and small fruits. However, jays will also eat spiders, snails, small rodents, frogs, baby birds and carrion when available.

At our backyard feeder, the jays eat everything that I serve: sunflower seeds, cracked corn, suet, peanuts, apples, and raisins. They display a hit-and-run strategy at the feeder, preferring not to tarry.

About those baby birds. Guilty as charged. Blue jays will on occasion dare to plunder other birds' nests: cracking and eating the eggs, and pillaging the live fledglings.

Not an attractive quality, but not unique in the avian world. Crows, ravens, magpies, jackdaws, and rooks will also periodically attack and rob bird nests.

Given the jay's characteristic bluster, my wife and I were amused recently to witness a bird-bath standoff between a common mourning dove and a blue jay. The dove was drinking water and lingering at the bird bath when the jay streaked in to commandeer the "water cooler." Rather than being driven off, the reputedly "skittish" dove held her ground and thrust her head aggressively towards the blue jay. The jay responded in kind, poking his beak towards the dove. After several rounds of thrust and parry, the blue jay headed for the hills.

How satisfying to have spotted the common dove besting a blue jay!

The colorfully-adorned jay, however, is more complex and nuanced than his bluster and swagger might reveal. Unmasked in his private life, he is exposed as a decent fellow.

It will surprise some to learn that the blue jay is a devoted parent and spouse. Not a solitary renegade.

Winning his true love in the course of fierce competition with other suitors, the blue jay mates for life. The male helps his bride gather materials to build their nest, assists in tending the eggs, and shares the task of collecting food to feed the hungry hatchings. The lovebirds reportedly display their commitment by exchanging gifts of twigs, grasses, or bits of food.

Moreover, the blue jay is a fierce protector of his or her immediate family and neighborhood. When the keen-eyed jay spots a hostile hawk, owl, racoon or fox in the vicinity, he sounds a harsh “jeer” call to warn his brood and other songbirds of the danger.

Far more consequential than being a good neighbor and loyal mate, however, the blue jay is lauded as making an unparalleled contribution to the natural world. A contribution that he makes incidentally, without fanfare, in the course of gathering his winter cache of acorns each fall.

It is mid-fall as I watch the blue jays swooping in from the treetops, bypassing the sunflower-seed feeder, and landing beneath our white oak trees where acorns blanket the ground. I observe the jays selecting acorns one at a time, filling their mouths with three or more, and darting away through the woods.

Ornithologists tell us that the blue jay’s expanded esophagus (*gular pouch*) enables him to carry multiple acorns while in flight.

According to biologist and author Douglas Tallamy (*The Nature of Oaks*, 2022), the blue jay collects hundreds of acorns and beechnuts during the fall, and in squirrel-like fashion, buries them in the ground up to one mile away from the trees where they fall. The jay’s plan is to retrieve and eat them during the winter months.

Though clever and intelligent, the blue jay remembers the locations of only about 25% of the estimated 4,500 acorns that he collects and buries each autumn. The unretrieved acorns are left to germinate and sprout. Consequently, each jay is responsible for planting “somewhere in the neighborhood of 3,360 oak trees every year of its seven-to-seventeen-year lifespan” (Tallamy, p.15).

“In a nutshell, blue jays are the keystone species in restoring stands of oaks and other mast trees in today’s fragmented landscape, where forest patches are isolated by farms, suburban sprawl, and highway construction. If you consider that burnished-brown acorns are a major food item for 150 species of birds and mammals and make up at least a quarter of the diets of black bears, white-tailed deer, raccoons, grey and fox squirrels, wild turkeys, and white-footed mice, to name a few, how can one begrudge jays some bird seed?” (*Audubon Magazine*, Sept-Oct 2008, “Slings and Arrows: Why Birders Love to Hate Blue Jays”).

By unwittingly planting millions of oak trees across North America each year, the blue jay is the undisputed *Johnny Appleseed* of the hardwood forests. A champion of the natural world.

If I listen whimsically, I can hear the blue jay tooting his own horn in regard to his colossal achievement (quoting Will Ferrell in *Anchorman: The Legend of Ron Burgundy*), “I don’t know how to put this, but I’m kind of a big deal. People know me.”

You are mistaken, my friend. People do not know you. The general public sees you as a rascal and a backyard bully. First impressions can be lasting. You have a long rap sheet and have been pigeon-holed as a “pest” for 150 years!

So, what do we surmise? Is the blue jay a culprit, a hero, or both?

Deeply etched into the minds of Americans, it may be difficult for the rank and file to *unsee* the jay's aggressive and predatory behavior.

However, in deepening my acquaintance with the enigmatic blue jay over the past several years, in spite of his faults - or perhaps because of them - he has *wheedled* his way into my heart.

M. Hart

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