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# NORTHWEST WILDLIFE PRESERVATION SOCIETY

## Blue Jay

*Cyanocitta cristata*



Photo Credit: John Milleker Photography

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The blue jay (*Cyanocitta cristata*) is one of the most recognizable birds in North America. With its bright blue plumage and distinctive cry, blue jays have become very popular all over Canada and the United States, to the point where it was named the official bird of Prince Edward Island. Most people know the blue jay to be a generally social bird, as it frequents forested areas near buildings that will make food easy to locate. Despite being so well-known for its blue feathers, surprisingly the blue jay is actually *not blue at all*.

### Characteristics

A typical blue jay will range in weight from 70 to 100 grams and will on average measure 30 cm (11.8 in) in length from beak to tail. They typically have a wingspan of 34-43 cm (13-17 in) tip to tip. Male and female blue jays are virtually identical in colour, their only difference is their size – males are slightly larger than their female counterparts.

These birds, as we know, are celebrated for their bright “blue” colour but are also spotted with white and black accents on their throats, feet, legs and beaks. Blue jays are not actually blue at all, but are in fact brown, which is the colour of melanin (a pigment in the feathers). Canadian Geographic explains that the inner structure of the blue jay’s feathers is designed in a way to distort light, making the feathers appear to have a blue colour. There are no birds that resemble blue jays close enough to be mistaken for them, but there are quite a few variations of Jays in North America. Among these is the Steller’s jay, which shares some similar characteristics in colour and size.

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Scientists have noted that blue jays undergo an interesting change of plumage in the early summer months (June/July). The process is called “anting”. This process typically involves using ants to preen and clean feathers though it is not uncommon to see blue jays utilizing other materials to the same effect.

## Life Cycle

Blue jays have a short life cycle, so they begin their mating early – typically at about one year of age or earlier. They mate in early May of each year, beginning with a courtship ritual. Blue jays are monogamous and mate for life, so they need only choose a mate once. In this initial ritual, several male jays approach a female and bob their heads up and down, “showing off” so to speak. The female will choose the male she desires and they will move into the nesting cycle.

A blue jay nest is built in a tree 10-25 ft (3-8 m) from the ground and in an area that will have readily accessible food. This is why blue jays like to nest in areas close to buildings and houses, as bird feeders make food very handy. Blue jays work with their mates to create their nests. Nests are made out of a variety of materials, including lichen, moss, grass and paper, and the inner cup of the nest is lined with mud, roots and soft feathers. These nests are not very large – about 10 cm (4 in) in diameter. During nesting season, blue jays keep to their nests and remain rather quiet. Afterward the males provide the females with food. This acts as a test of ability to provide for a future family. Once a male blue jay has proven this, they begin to build together. This activity begins with the careful selection of twigs for the base of the nest. If blue jays feel that they are in danger, they will often abandon unfinished nests in search of a safer area.

There are typically four to five eggs produced by a female every mating season. These eggs incubate for a period of 16-18 days before hatching. When they hatch, nestlings are naked and born with their eyes closed and a red lining around their mouths. These babies remain nestlings for 17-21 days after hatching. By this time, the nestlings become fledglings and are prepared to leave the nest. It takes about three weeks for the fledglings to get used to acquiring their own food – at this time they can leave the nest for good, though some fledglings remain with their parents for 1-2 further months.

The usual lifespan of a wild blue jay is 7 years. There have been records showing some blue jays living to 17 years of age in the wild, while in captivity they can live as long as 26 years!

## Habitat

Blue jays like to live in deciduous or coniferous trees – mixed forests are their favourite, and they prefer it to be less heavily wooded. They like to live in settled areas (near houses, buildings) so long as there are enough trees around to provide food and keep them safe.

In terms of geographic location, blue jays live in a very widespread range of forests. They live as far south as Texas and Florida, and as far north as northern Alberta. The blue jay population has not, historically speaking, been on the decline, but rather the opposite. They originate further east, which is why they are so popular in places like Prince Edward Island, but are slowly moving further west. This is why many blue jays are being spotted and their numbers are rising on the west coast of Canada and the United States.

These birds also tend to be migratory after the breeding season, though their patterns are a mystery. Some blue jays choose to migrate south while some choose to remain north all year round. Some individuals choose to go south one year and then remain in the north the following year. Scientists have tried to discern the reasoning behind these birds’ irregular migratory patterns though there has been no answer quite yet. Despite the fact that there is no concrete explanation as to why or why not blue jays migrate they are listed under the US Migratory Bird Act as a protected bird species.

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## Behaviour

They eat a variety of foods, though their beaks are designed for eating nuts and seeds. They like to eat small fruits and some grains like corn as well as peanuts and sunflower seeds. Some blue jays have a tendency to prey on the eggs or young of other birds, and they like to eat bugs (like the harmful tent caterpillar). Blue jays have a small pouch in their throats to store food, called a “gular pouch” or crop. They usually fill this crop and then deposit the food they have collected into a hollow tree to keep for the future. Most blue jays can fit 2-3 acorns at a single time in their pouches.

Henry David Thoreau, a 19<sup>th</sup>-century writer, described the blue jay’s call as an “unrelenting, steel-cold scream”. Some people may not agree with this statement, as the blue jay makes a wide variety of calls, including soft coos and melodious sounds during courtship rituals. A blue jay’s calls can be utilized for that very reason, as well as to warn others of impending danger. Some blue jays have been known to imitate the cries of hawks to trick other bird species into thinking there is danger nearby. This is a helpful trick for blue jays to use when they wish to have a bird feeder all to themselves.

Blue jays have a crest of feathers on and around their heads that rise in a couple of different situations. The crest forms a peak-shape when a blue jay gets excited or aggressive. If they get excited or surprised, the crest will lean forward. If a blue jay is startled or frightened, or senses danger, its crest will bristle. It is generally concluded that the lower a blue jay’s crest is, the lower its aggression level and the more relaxed the individual is. Blue jay crests are usually at their lowest when tending to nestlings or feeding with conspecifics.

## Threats

Blue jays are not considered to be an endangered species. According to the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), blue jays are listed as “Least Concern”. This does not, however, mean that any predators do not hunt blue jays. Blue jays are vulnerable to raptors such as Cooper’s hawks, sharp-shinned hawks, falcons and owls. In addition cats and raccoons can also catch them. Blue jay nestlings and eggs are vulnerable to opossums, crows, snakes and even squirrels.

Humans do not pose much of a threat to blue jays except in the alteration or destruction of suitable habitat. Pets kept by humans, such as cats and dogs, are a concern to jays. Blue jays in return do not pose much of a threat to humans, but are bold birds and get aggressive if humans get too close to their nests. There has been evidence that some blue jays are carriers of the West Nile virus, which could eventually affect humans.

## What We Can Do To Help

Though blue jays are not in any danger, there are some things humans can do to assure the safety of any of these birds and others that share their habitat.

- Plant deciduous and coniferous trees to increase the chances of having a family of blue jays move into your neighbourhood.
- Avoid cutting down trees on the outskirts of forests, as these are areas where most blue jays will be.
- Avoid getting too close to blue jay nests – this will lessen the aggression of the birds, which will allow you to continue observing them safely.

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- Do not draw the attention of blue jay predators (such as pets cats and dogs) to their nests, as that will increase the chances of it being destroyed by a predator.
- Volunteer to help organizations like the Northwest Wildlife Preservation Society.
- Hang a bird feeder on a tree. Make sure that this is a safe distance from the ground so fewer predators will have access.

## Other Interesting Facts

Blue jays are generally the same colour, but the patterns of black and white on their heads and necks vary extensively. It is believed that these markings jays use to differentiate between other individuals and recognize the birds they know!

The blue jay is the mascot represented of the Toronto Blue Jays professional baseball team.

## Where & When to view a Blue Jay

Blue jays mate in the late spring/early summer, so you will usually see a family of them around this time. However, seeing as blue jays have unusual migratory behaviours and reside over almost the entirety of North America, it is possible to see them any time near suitable habitat.

## Bibliography

### *Web Resources:*

BioKids – an easy-to-follow website that lays out all of the basic information necessary to learn about Blue Jays:

[http://www.biokids.umich.edu/critters/Cyanocitta\\_cristata/](http://www.biokids.umich.edu/critters/Cyanocitta_cristata/)

Hinterland Who's Who website - a good summary including a range distribution map:

<http://www.hww.ca/en/species/birds/blue-jay.html>

Birds of the World – An Online Bird Book – a catalogue of birds that helps to differentiate the types of Jays in North America:

[http://carolinabirds.org/HTML/WLD\\_Corvidae\\_Jay.htm](http://carolinabirds.org/HTML/WLD_Corvidae_Jay.htm)

The IUCN Redlist – an excellent resources for determining the endangered status of wildlife:

<http://www.iucnredlist.org/details/22705611/0>

Bird Houses 101 – this particular page details the mating habits of Blue Jays:

<http://www.birdhouses101.com/blue-jay-mating.asp>

Canadian Geographic – an online resource for information regarding Blue Jays, including the anatomy of a Blue Jay and a detailed range distribution map:

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[http://www.canadiangeographic.ca/kids/animal-facts/blue\\_jay.asp](http://www.canadiangeographic.ca/kids/animal-facts/blue_jay.asp)

The Cornell Lab of Ornithology – a well-organized resource website that includes audio and video recordings of Blue Jays:

[http://www.allaboutbirds.org/guide/blue\\_jay/id](http://www.allaboutbirds.org/guide/blue_jay/id)

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