

# Blue Jay

Blue jays belong to the bird family Corvidae, which means they are close relatives of crows, ravens and magpies. Although they often chase other birds away from feeders and out of backyards, some birders find blue jays attractive and entertaining. Because of the popularity of bird-feeding, the population and range of the blue jay appears to be increasing.

## Songbirds of Missouri

If you're the kind that appreciates oak trees for their shade and beauty, you might want to thank that noisy blue jay in your backyard. Many birdwatchers consider blue jays to be common – and mildly annoying – members of the bird world. But what most people don't know is that some biologists give the blue jay much of the credit for re-foresting the central United States after the last Ice Age.

Depending on the season, blue jays eat fruits, insects, seeds, small birds, and some small mammals and reptiles. In the fall and early winter, however, they relentlessly collect and bury acorns, a process known as "caching." Although blue jays use these buried acorns as food during winter, not all of these cached snacks are found. Many of them stay buried and eventually grow into oak trees.

To get an idea how many trees result from this process, consider this: One study documented that 50 blue jays transported and buried 150,000 acorns in 28 days. That's an average of 110 acorns per bird per day!

Thousands of years ago, when glaciers retreated from the Midwest at the end of the last Ice Age, they scraped away much of this region's established forests. Their retreat left a bare landscape that needed trees to hold soil in place and counteract the forces of wind and water erosion.

Biologists say acorn-burying animals, working from the edges of remaining forests, helped re-establish oak trees throughout this region at a much faster pace than the trees could have accomplished through their own re-seeding processes. Squirrels and other animals likely had a part, but many experts believe it was the blue jay that took the lead role in re-foresting the central United States so abundantly. Without the help from blue jays, Missouri would probably have had a much different landscape than the one pioneers found so attractive when they arrived here.

Seen year-round in Missouri, blue jays have a bright blue back, a whitish-gray belly and a grayish-blue feather-crested head. Feathers on their wings are bright blue with white and black bands. Another

identifying mark is the collar of black feathers around their throats.

The blue jay's breeding season begins in mid-March and continues into early summer. They build cup-shaped nests of twigs, small roots, moss, and other plant material. The female lays three to seven eggs and incubates them for 16 to 18 days. The male feeds the female while she is incubating the eggs. Seventeen to 21 days after hatching, the young fledge and the family travels and forages together until early fall.

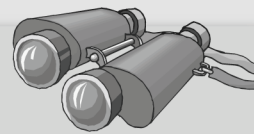
Some birders and hunters are annoyed by the blue jay's loud call. But far more offensive to some nature enthusiasts is this bird's aggressive method of driving other birds away from feeders. Blue jays also have a habit of raiding other nests and destroying the eggs or young birds in those nests.

From a human perspective, this behavior seems unnecessary, but from the blue jays' standpoint, they are simply protecting their own food sources and nesting territories. The same boldness that makes the blue jay intimidating to other birds also makes it an easy bird for humans to observe and study.

For more information on blue jays, contact your nearest Missouri Department of Conservation office.

(Missouri Show-Me Standards: S.3, S.4)

### Be a Bird Watcher!



#### Look...

Blue jays can be found in both urban and rural areas, but they seem to have a preference for wooded areas that are interspersed with frequent clearings. Blue jays are year-round residents in Missouri. However, as is the case with many local songbirds, they are probably most visible in the spring and early summer when they are heavily involved in courtship and mating activities.

#### ...and Listen

Blue jays have a wide variety of calls, but the one that is familiar to most of us is the loud "jay" call for which the bird is named.