

Blue Jay *Cyanocitta cristata*



Folk Name: Jay Bird, Jay, Devil Bird

Status: Resident

Abundance: Very Common

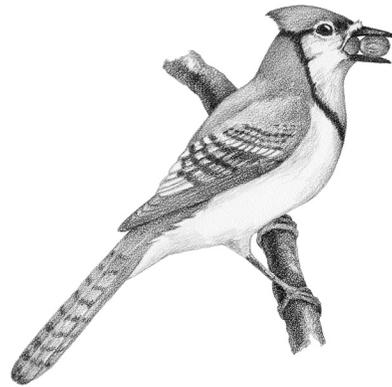
Habitat: Woodlands, parks, residential areas

The Blue Jay is one of the most common and best-known birds in the Carolinas. It is a large, often noisy bird that is regularly seen in some numbers. It is omnivorous and is a common visitor to yards and feeder stations throughout the Piedmont. Its blue head crest, its vibrant blue, black, and white plumage, and its characteristic call of *jay, jay*, make it unmistakable.

Jays are known for making a wide variety of odd calls and noises and also for successfully imitating the calls of several other species of birds. Scientists have grouped their many diverse calls into categories including jeer calls, pumphandle calls, rattle calls, contact calls, mimic calls, and more. In this region, jays are known to regularly imitate the call of the Red-shouldered, Broad-winged, and Red-tailed hawks. They have also been heard to imitate woodpeckers, gulls, owls, and other birds and sounds. Many reasons for this behavior have been suggested, but there is no consensus on why they mimic.

Jays are year-round residents throughout the Piedmont. Migrants from the North join local birds in the fall and winter. More than 400 have been tallied in a single day on local Christmas Bird Counts. When these migrants return in the spring, they are often seen moving in small flocks of approximately 5–50 birds. We have one report from Catawba County of a flock of over 250 seen heading north on April 15, 2002. Banding evidence has shown that some Blue Jays captured in winter in the North Carolina Piedmont, were banded in New Jersey as nestlings.

Blue Jays are known for being quiet around their nests.



York County ornithologist Bill Hilton Jr. studied Blue Jays at length while working on his doctorate in Minnesota. He studied more than 500 nests and banded over 2,000 birds. Hilton reported that observers could locate a Blue Jay nest by listening for a quiet “kueu-kueu-kueu” vocalization that mated pairs make near an active nest, however, he warned “[t]his sound was almost inaudible even in the slightest wind.” Hilton also advised birders to look for white, man-made materials that jays like to use on the outside of their stick nests. Jays have been known to reuse a well-built nest for several years.

There are many historical accounts of Blue Jays in the Central Carolinas. Like our other Corvids, the Blue Jay was a known egg thief, and despite its good looks, it developed an unpleasant reputation. In fact, the Blue Jay was once known as the “Devil Bird” here. It was believed to be a spy, messenger, and aid to Satan. According to North Carolina’s adopted science text for grade schools in the early 1900s: “Almost every Southern child has been told the story of the Jaybird’s visits every Friday



Blue Jay. (Will Stuart)



Blue Jay at nest feeding nestlings. (William G. Cobey)

to the place where the King of Darkness dwells. There are several variations of this story. One is that each bird carries a chip in its beak to help keep the fires burning. Another is that each one carries a few grains of sand in its mouth with which to reward old Satan for combing the feathers of its head and that he sends it back to earth to pry into the thoughts and deeds of men.”

In the town of Chester in the late 1870s, Leverett Loomis noted the Blue Jay was “familiar and unsuspecting, nesting abundantly around dwellings, and in the shade-trees along the thoroughfares.” In Statesville in 1916, physician and ornithologist J.E. McLaughlin advised the public to cast aspersions on the Blue Jay instead of the reviled House Sparrow: “When you have any rocks to throw at birds, throw them at the blue jay; he is the Judas of the feathered tribe. He is of no service to the farmer or gardener and he destroys the eggs and young birds of the other species. He will always be more or less popular, however, as he is like some people you and I know—he wears good clothes and makes a loud noise.”

Charlotte birder William McIlwaine spoke far and wide on the topic of bird conservation and the importance of birds to humans and the environment, but he too had his personal bias:

And this afternoon I stole a nest. It was fifteen feet up against the trunk of a little cedar. The bird was sitting on four green eggs quite heavily spotted on the larger end with dark brown and lavender. I tell this openly, for this bird is not protected by the laws of state or nation. Most birds are so protected. But this fellow does not deserve protection; nor does he need it. I took the nest of a blue jay.

Fortunately, McIlwaine also provided information on local Blue Jay activities. On May 16, 1927, he reported: “This is the day of young birds. I get pictures of young field lark and a young jay. While I was taking the picture of the jay the old birds (There were three of them.) were flying down at me, and nailing me on the crown of my hat. I have more respect for a jay than I had before.” A year later, he wrote:

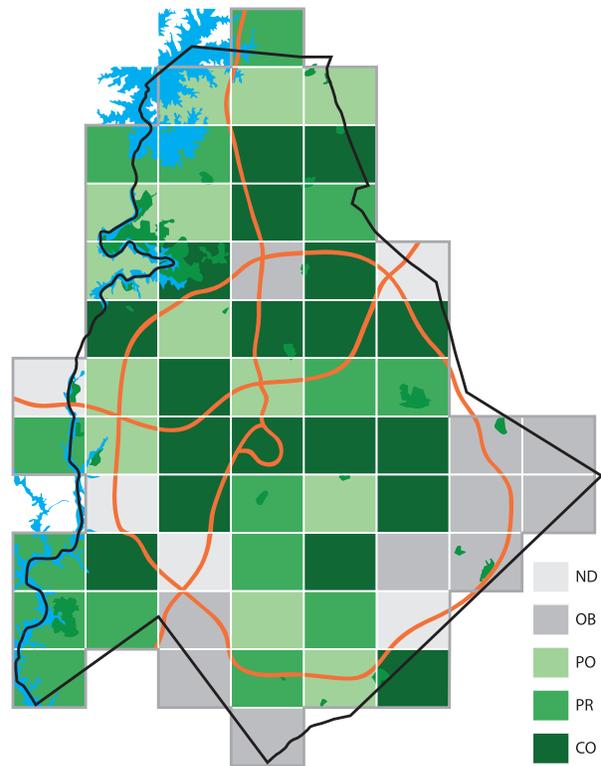
But with no exceptions the noisiest thing in feathers is the blue jay, and this is his noisy season. He seems to have gotten off his first brood, and to be leading the young folk around to show them all points of danger. They come and gather around some poor luckless person, and start their concert of “Thief! Thief! Thief!”

McIlwaine found two Blue Jay nests on April 23, 1928, both with the birds “setting”: one nest was “fifteen or twenty feet up in a crotch of a white oak. Another is twice as high, out on a limb on a pine.” He photographed another Blue Jay nest on 4 May the following year, writing: “I take a jay’s nest with four eggs. The old bird has been

sitting, I know not how long.”

In Charlotte in 1943, Elizabeth Clarkson reported our earliest recorded start of a Blue Jay nest on 16 February. Data from our local banding stations indicate some young fledge as late as July or August. These are in all likelihood young of a second brood.

In recent years, the Blue Jay has added another stain to its somewhat dismal reputation. In 2002, a Blue Jay from Mecklenburg County had the dubious distinction of being the first Blue Jay identified as carrying the West Nile Virus (WNV) in North Carolina. That year, the first two cases of mosquito-transmitted WNV in humans were reported in the state. One of these North Carolina cases was from Mecklenburg County. Anxiety was high among residents after the report of this infected jay. The local health department was soon “overwhelmed” with reports of dead birds, having received over 500 calls in a two-day period. Subsequently, of the 118 birds submitted for testing, 62 tested positive for West Nile Virus that year. Fortunately, an estimated 80% of WNV cases do not result in symptoms, and most cases with symptoms are mild. Only two human deaths were reported in the state during the first decade of monitoring. Crows and jays, as well as several raptor species, are known to be reservoirs of this virus. A crow found at Jordan Lake in 2000 was the first bird ever detected to have the virus in either of the Carolinas.



Mecklenburg County Breeding Bird Atlas:
Widespread (PR/15, CO/19)