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OREGON JAYS

by

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One of the members of the Audubon Society said he thought a small family of jays was the noisiest pack in the autumn. They squawk through the woods as if they wanted everybody to know just where they are, but in the spring, after they have paired and are nesting, they suddenly go speechless as if they can't trust themselves to talk out loud. Where they are nesting they flit as silently as shadows through the trees.

In the early spring, if you hear the jays squawking about the maples along the hillside, you may be sure that is only a playground. A quarter of a mile beyond you may find a thick clump of fir saplings. This is the kind of a thicket they like for a home. When they begin nesting in May, they are so shy we have never been able to catch them carrying nesting materials. Their homes are well concealed in thick branches in perhaps a spruce or fir. With all the bird walks of the Audubon Society, the record of finding a jay's nest is a rare occasion.

The Steller or Coast jay is easily recognized because of its blue body and high brownish crest. It often lights in the lower branches of a tree and begins to hop vigorously up the ladder of the higher branches. The bluejay is a beautiful forest bird, but he is not liked by many bird lovers because during the nesting season he sneaks around stealing the eggs.

and young of smaller birds. While engaged in egg hunting, he is as silent and secretive as when he approaches his own nest. Those farmers who are growing filberts generally discover that there is quite a loss of nuts on account of these jays. If filberts have been planted near a timber line, both jays and squirrels make a business of collecting the nuts, especailly in harvest time.

When a pair of these jays are engaged in nest robbing, they perhaps wander quite a distance from home. In a thicket where we found a bluejay's nest, we also discovered a robin's nest with young birds about fifty feet away, also the nest of a song-sparrow with eggs. It seemed as if the jays wanted to stand well with their neighbors and live in peace, because as far as we knew they made no efforts to rob these birds.

Another jay that is a resident of the western part of Oregon from the Columbia River on south through the Willamette Valley is the California or long-tailed jay. This looks more like the eastern bluejay in color. The upper parts are blue except for the back, which is a dark-brownish color. The lower part of the body is white, but there is a bluish streaking on the throat. This sort of a military coat distinguishes him from the other jay. This jay is also known as a robber of other bird homes.

Whether a bird is beneficial or injurious depends almost entirely upon what it eats. Years ago the experts of the Biological Survey made studies of many of the bluejays by taking specimens at different times of the year and exam-

ining their stomachs. An examination of 326 California jays showed that 27% of the contents consisted of animal matter and 73% of vegetable. The larger part of this animal food was made up of insects, such as grasshoppers and the remains of egg-shells and bird bones. In its vegetable diet, this bird seems to be fond of cherries, apricots, and prunes, as well as the grain that it finds in the fields.

One day we were watching several English sparrows that were feeding on the ground under an oak tree when a pair of California jays came flying through the trees. With a loud squawk one swooped down with his wings and tail spread and his feathers puffed out as much as possible, evidently expecting to scare the sparrows. He dropped right into their midst with a screech that plainly said, "Get out of here or I'll eat you alive." The bluff might have worked with any bird except an Englisher. The sparrows sputtered in contempt and were ready to fight, but the jay's attitude changed in a second. He took on an air of meekness and unconcern and hopped off looking in the grass for something he had no idea of finding. It seemed to be a good touch of jay character.

In addition to the two jays mentioned above, there are other jays that live in the higher mountains. These are called "camp robbers" or "whisky jacks." The first record of this Oregon or gray jay was reported in the Lewis and Clark Expedition. When one is up in a region like Mt. Hood, he will find these gray jays very friendly and willing to share

his lunch with him, especially if he has meat. A hunter who is dressing a deer in the mountains is likely to be surrounded by these jays that are bold enough to light on his shoulder. they will help him do the skinning, and stuff themselves, and carry off scraps to store away.