

California Scrub Jay



Nearly everyone is familiar with this abundant bird of suburban yards, but most call it by the wrong name. This is NOT a Blue Jay, it is a California Scrub Jay, or more casually a Scrub Jay. The Blue Jay is another species of jay that lives mostly east of the Rocky Mountains, with a very different appearance. Bird books older than a few years will list our Scrub Jays as "Western Scrub Jays", but recently that former species has been split into three new species with distinct ranges and feeding habits. The one in our area is the California Scrub Jay.

Scrub Jays may be easily recognized by their large size, long tail, light blue head, wings and tail, and rounded head shape. The only other common jay in our area, the Steller's Jay, is a darker, deeper blue with a black or dark gray head with a prominent crest.

Like all jays, and their relatives the crows, these birds are bold and noisy. They are constantly squaking and screaming, and will frequently perch on an exposed location like the peak of a roof or top of a tree where they keep an eye on the neighborhood. You'll also see them in lumbering flight going from exposed perch to exposed perch.

Scrub Jays will eat almost any kind of seed or suet at feeders, and a wide variety of other things in the wild. They also bury food in caches for later use, particularly their favorite feeder treat: Peanuts.

Scrub Jays are very, very intelligent. In fact, their ratio of brain mass to body mass is almost as high as chimpanzees. The only species with a much higher ratio is humans. They are the only animal other than primates and dolphins that plans ahead for the future. As an example of their cleverness, if they place food in a cache while competitors might have been watching they will come back later when they are alone and move the food while nobody is watching! They are also smart enough to cache specific foods in places where those foods are harder to find, instead of distributing different types of foods randomly among their caches. Sort of like humans carrying water when traveling through the desert.