

Focus on the Jay

One of the gaudiest birds that you will see in the garden is the Jay. If you have one visiting your garden then it is a very good indication that you have some quality woodland nearby. You might even find a Jay trying to bury acorns in your lawn and, if it forgets where it hid the acorn, an oak sapling might develop.

Many people who are not regular birdwatchers just cannot believe it when they see a Jay in the garden. This striking bird has subtle pinks and browns in the body plumage, vibrant blue flashes in the wing and a bright white rump with a dark tail. The shrieks and rattles that are its normal voice are also striking (and strident) and the bird's size is much bigger than the tits and finches normally seen. However, Jays are not very bold birds and are often shy and diffident until they become used to new places. In an old setting, like the garden of a country rectory, they can be very much at home and a seriously annoying scavenger of garden peas!

The Jay's diet is very varied. Carrion of all sorts is readily eaten and road casualties may be taken where a road runs through woodland. In the summer, the eggs and young of other birds are often taken to provide high protein nourishment for their own chicks. However, the main food, especially in autumn, is acorns. The presence of oaks in a woodland will be a pretty good indication that there will be Jays about, and Jays will fly quite long distances to collect acorns from oak trees with a good crop. These are usually eaten straight away but large quantities are often collected and cached in the earth for eating later. These flights may be over urban areas and give rise to many reports of migrating Jays – the birds often fly high with the wind and can be seen from afar.

There are about 40 other jay species worldwide, often with very bright plumage, but of similar sizes and shapes to our own. Ours has a very wide distribution across most of Europe and central Asia to Japan and there are in the order of 36 distinct

species currently accepted within this distribution. North America boasts a number of species, several of which have been studied in detail. Some of these have very complex social systems, with relatives of the breeding pair (generally young from earlier nesting attempts) helping at the nest to raise the young. They are, of course, increasing the chances of their genes (which they share with their parents) progressing into the next generation – even if they do not breed themselves.

Chris Mead

Jay

Fascinating Facts

Falling to bits!

All birds fall to bits, deliberately and very systematically, when they moult each year and replace their worn feathers with new ones. Some young Jays fall to bits in a completely different way. They are birds that have been in the nest, growing their first set of feathers, and have been starved – possibly through a spell of bad weather. During this period of stress, the growing bird is unable to lay down as much of the pigment melanin in its flight feathers as it normally would. The lack of this melanin leaves a pale line across the wing feathers and this part of the wing is much weaker than normal. This is known as a fault bar. In really bad cases the feathers break at this point and the poor birds become flightless! If kept in captivity and fed well, when the annual moult comes round next year, they grow perfectly good feathers!

Galloping through the woods.

Jays are passerines (songbirds) and they do sing. Their song is seldom heard and is very variable in nature, with much mimicking of other birds and sounds – though not as good as the famous Lyrebird that appeared on television doing impressions of chainsaws and automatic cameras. Many of the 'normal' calls consist of rhythmic 'clicks' and 'tchacks' and I once came across a group of Jays on a wooded Welsh hillside that sounded like a group of galloping horses!

How oakwoods move uphill.

Yes, it is the Jays! Their caching of acorns is the most important feature in the movement of such a large seed any distance from the fruiting tree. Obviously acorns can roll downhill and can be washed down by heavy rain – or float downstream. However, going uphill they do have to be carried by some animal or bird. Jays are very capable of finding most of the acorns that they hide but, inevitably, some are not found and others will have been buried by birds that die before they need to find them.



Tommy Holden