



The Jay

One of the most interesting things about participating in the BTO Garden BirdWatch scheme is that sometimes you get the opportunity to see and record a bird that is completely new to your garden. Such an occurrence happened to me during the middle of last month. Whilst drinking a coffee and looking at the birds in the garden, I spotted a bird which had just settled on my Birch tree. I could tell it was different and when I had a better look, I found it was a Jay. This is the first time I have recorded this species in my garden. What a coincidence then that I had made a decision quite a few weeks ago to write about the Jay for the February edition on this website.

This time of year is when you are most likely to see the Jay. Unlike most members of the Crow family, it is a colourful bird. It is Jackdaw-sized and is pinkish brown in colour. Its head has a black and white flecked crest which is raised when the bird is alarmed or excited. It has a white throat and a black moustache. Its wings are black and white with a flash of blue feathers. It has a black tail and a white rump which is distinctly noticeable should you see it flying up into trees. Like all crows it is an intelligent bird and also a mimic. When threatened it has been known to call out like a bird of prey, an owl or even a cat.

The Jay eats beech mast, hazelnuts, seeds, and invertebrates, and like some other members of the Crow family, it will also predate nests for eggs and young birds. However, its main source of food, especially during autumn and winter is the acorn, and because of this, there is a strong relationship between this species and the Oak tree. During the autumn, Jays will collect acorns and bury them so that they have a reliable food source during the winter months. It is reported that a single bird can cache up to 5,000 acorns at a time. Those they don't manage to relocate will germinate and produce a sapling. As a result of this, Jays play an important role in the dispersal of this tree.

Primarily a woodland bird, you may see them in mature gardens where they will take peanuts and seed. Two years ago there was a marked increase of Jays coming in to gardens as recorded by BTO Garden Birdwatchers, possibly because of a combination of a bad acorn harvest and harsh weather. British Jays are sedentary birds but sometimes in winter, numbers will arrive from the continent if the acorn harvest is poor.

Jean Parrott



Jean is a voluntary Ambassador for the BTO's (British Trust for Ornithology) Garden BirdWatch scheme in Nottinghamshire. If you would like a free information pack about the scheme, please contact her on 0770 4809741 or jpbirds@talktalk.net

Photo of Jay by Edmund Fellowes / BTO

