STELLER’S JAY

Julie Zickefoose: Looking for What’s Wonderful — A Winter’s Tale

Also:
Top 10 Reasons to Love Zick Dough
Watcher at the Window
Looking for What’s Wonderful—
A Winter’s Tale
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Top: Steller’s jay.

Above: Red-headed woodpecker.

Right: Carolina wren.
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“May you live in interesting times” is said to be an ancient Chinese blessing that is actually a curse. In fact, the first known use of that phrase was in 1936 by a British diplomat. He was, as we are, living in interesting times. With a pandemic, political madness, wildfires, and hurricanes, I think we are all ready to return to a less interesting era. The parallel universe of backyard birds (and squirrels) has provided an easily accessible respite to the madness of 2020—at least, that has been my experience.

Most of my birdfeeders are visible from my kitchen window, which is probably why washing the dishes is my favorite household chore. Watching “my” birds going about their daily lives allows me to drop my mental baggage for a few minutes and focus my attention on others. Mourning doves nested this summer at eye level in the cedar tree next to my deck, but nearly obscured by branches. Still, I could see an incubating parent, and later, one little head. I think I even witnessed the baby fledging: One bird was in the nest and walking on the branches nearby, and then it took off—the first time the nest was empty in many weeks. I felt triumphant, although I had no role in it whatsoever, other than providing seeds to the parents. What a wonderful escape those doves gave me.

It is egotistical to think that the problems we are going through are bigger or more important than the perils birds face. They, too, are out there just trying to survive, make a living, care for their families, and pass on their genes. They, too, face disease, loss of their homes, predators, injury, dangerous weather, fire, and, some of them, a 24-hour non-stop flight across the Gulf of Mexico—self-propelled! It’s easy to forget their challenges, though, as we watch them enjoying the gifts we present each day. They seem appreciative, and gifts gratefully received warm the heart of the giver. It is the season of giving.

Best wishes to you and those you love for happy holidays, a normal new year—full of health, joy, and peace—and for many healthy and grateful backyard birds!

Dawn Hewitt
WBB team captain
Looking for Gifts for the Birder on Your List?

Santa’s List

Naughty
Philip
Simon
Mary
Carl
Sally
Jason
Billy
Cloe

Nice
Amanda
Stuart
Nigel
Emily
Mike
Peter
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Cover Species

The Steller’s Jay: A Lovable Rascal

Ferris Weddle
Even though I’m less than enthusiastic about the winter months, which curtail many outdoor activities, I do appreciate the opportunity to observe and feed the hardy winter birds.

I risk the ire of some bird lovers when I rank the Steller’s jay as my favorite. Louts, loudmouths, plunderers, pigs, bullies—yes, I can hear the usually irate denouncement of those who see the impudent and bold jays dominating bird feeders of the West. I’ve found that people are inclined to talk to and to talk back to jays, and often with less than refined language. Underneath the harsh judgement, however, there’s usually a thread of amusement and admiration. In short, it’s rather difficult to adamantly dislike such a loveable rascal as the extremely intelligent Steller’s jay.

On the day this was written, I stood for a few minutes in the slushy snow under a heavily overcast Idaho sky, and felt an uplift of spirit as I watched a half dozen jays rollicking joyfully in nearby leafless willows. As they moved from lower limbs to higher limbs, their raucous conversation drifted toward me—and when they spied a dog some distance away, the voicing became even louder, a kind of teasing and mocking as three of the birds flew to the tree near the dog.

Many people mistakenly call the Steller’s jay—our only native crested western jay—a blue jay. True, the Steller’s body, wings, and tail are dark blue (although it has a gray mantle and breast), but the common name blue jay should correctly be applied to the common eastern jay species, Cyanocitta cristata. Scientifically, the western crested jay is C. stelleri, named for the German naturalist George Steller, who described the species in 1741 while with the Russian expedition that discovered Alaska.

The first extensive description of the Steller’s jay was made by Lewis and Clark on their trailblazing 1804–06 expedition, and later Elliott Coues, a noted 19th-century naturalist, had these comments to make about jays: “All jays make their share of noise in the world; they fret and scold about trifles, quarrel over nothing, and keep everything in a ferment. The particular kind we are talking about is nowise behind his fellows in these respects; a stranger to modesty and forbear-

Steller’s jay in flight.
ance and the many gentle qualities that charm us in some little birds and endear them to us... he’s a regular filibuster, ready for any sort of adventure that promises sport or spoil, even if spiced with danger.”

I can agree completely with Coues’ added comments: “I confess to a sneaking sort of regard for him. An elegant, dashing fellow, of good presence if not good manners; a tough, wiry, independent creature with sense enough to take precious good care of himself.”

The jays are members of the family Corvidae, the crow family, which includes magpies, crows, ravens, and Clark’s nutcracker. For intelligence, this family ranks near the top—if not, the top—in the bird kingdom, and most of them are bold, independent, and rugged. They ask no quarter and give none.

Since I live in the lowlands of north-central Idaho, I see only an occasional Steller’s from spring to early fall. The reason is simple enough: These jays prefer the high country for nesting. They’re secretive and highly skilled in hiding the fairly bulky nests. I have yet to locate this jay’s nest, but I’ve never tried too hard. This high-country nesting habit is fortunate for smaller and even larger birds, since jays occasionally eat the eggs and young of other birds. Human dwellers in high country consider the plundering of other nests by jays a despicable thing, but the raids are considerably fewer than is usually believed. Under nature’s rather harsh laws, nest plundering can be considered beneficial. The potential of
Jay predation forces other birds to be more careful in selecting nest sites. And we can’t forget that the eggs and young of the jays may also be subject to predation by mammals and other larger bird species.

As is true of other crow family members, the Steller’s jay is classified as an omnivorous feeder: If it’s edible, the jay will eat it whether of animal or vegetable origin. Insects of all kinds are on the menu (especially when the three to five young are being cared for), plus berries, nuts, seeds, and the like. For variety, an occasional frog, lizard, or small snake may be eaten. Road-killed animals and birds will not be passed up by hungry jays, either, although food of plant origin is the most important in the birds’ diet. For bird feeders, dog and cat food (dry or moist) is happily welcomed by the jays—and so are sunflower seeds, corn, various grains, fruits, nuts, suet, and meat scraps.

In one area where I lived for several years at an elevation of some 2,300 feet, I often had from 30 to 40 Steller’s jays in residence. I should say, boisterous residence, as they tried to gobble up any foodstuff I put out, including the dog’s food if the latter didn’t stand guard. More often than not, a satiated jay would simply snatch up food and take it away to hide in nearby trees. Smaller birds such as juncos, chickadees, and sparrows might be pushed aside, but they managed to eat when the happy-go-lucky jays went elsewhere to frolic and explore.

No doubt about it, jays are loudmouths. Just ask a hunter who is skillfully (he hopes) stalking a game animal. Suddenly that piercing, squawking cry of the forest’s guardian imp is broadcasting the potential danger. More often than not, the hunter will add his somewhat profane voice to shatter the forest solitude. While the Steller’s normal voicings aren’t musical or numerous, the birds are quite excellent mimics, a trait typical of several Corvidae members. The jays can imitate the voicing of certain hawks—and cause all kinds of commotion among birds and mammals that may be prey for raptors. I once saw a flock of chickens become hysterical when a cocky jay decided to be a hawk for a few seconds—and apparently just for the heck of it. I’ve heard jays imitate, or try to imitate, the
querulous sounds of robins and other birds.

One case of mimicry left me feeling rather foolish. In late winter when the dusky and ruffed grouse were beginning to indulge in their courtship rites, I hoped to obtain photographs of the birds. After hearing the sounds of the dusky grouse on several occasions, I set out to locate a hooting area. There was hooting from time to time, and I kept trying to follow the sounds, never getting near my potential subjects for sighting, let alone photos. Finally it dawned on me that those hoots were too scattered and too numerous. The Steller’s jays had been visible off and on, and eventually I caught one in its mimicry. No doubt a more experienced birder with a keener sense of hearing would have recognized the fraud—but I was fooled by it. And I was amused by the jays’ behavior and skill in spite of my muted embarrassment.

Truthfully, I don’t really mind being fooled by nature’s creatures—or Mother Nature in general. I treasure the other adventures I’ve had with Steller’s jays and with their smaller, crestless relative, the Canada jay (also known as gray jay, camp-robber, Oregon jay or Whiskey Jack).

Reprinted from Bird Watcher’s Digest.
Four cool things about woodpeckers

What makes a woodpecker a woodpecker? Certainly their behavior is an identifying characteristic: Most forage for insects on the trunks and branches of trees, and drill holes to get to prey or sap within; they drum with their bill; and they nest and roost in cavities they have excavated. But woodpeckers also have unique anatomical adaptations to their ecological niche.

1. **Their feet:** Most woodpeckers have zygodactyl feet, consisting of four toes arranged in an X pattern. That arrangement is ideal for grasping limbs and trunks of trees, and allows them to walk vertically up trees, and to cling tightly while they excavate. However, two of North America’s 22 woodpecker species have two toes front and one rear; they are the black-backed woodpecker and the American three-toed woodpecker.

2. **Their tails:** Woodpecker tail feathers are stiff, providing tripod-like support while the bird climbs and hammers on tree trunks.

3. **Their tongues:** Woodpecker tongues are long—a red-bellied woodpecker’s tongue is three times as long as its bill! Its tip is barbed. Those features are useful for probing and foraging deep inside holes in trees. The base of the tongue is at the top of the bill. On the outside of the skull, it winds up between the eyes and over the forehead, divides and extends over the back of the bird’s head, circles around the jaw, and comes together at the back of the mouth. Thus, it serves as padding for the brain as the bird excavates.

4. **Their nostrils:** Woodpeckers have bristly feathers over their nostrils to prevent inhalation of wood particles as they excavate.

The next time you see a woodpecker on a tree or at a birdfeeder, grab your binocular for a closer look and admire the cool anatomy of a unique group of birds.
Squirrel Olympics

Some years back, my lovely wife bought me a new bird feeder. She is always buying me bird feeders. She knows that bird feeders make me happy, and putting them up keeps me out of her hair. She bought me a wonderful feeder. It was one of those with the suction cups that allow the feeder to be attached to a window. The feeder came equipped with two small trays to hold the seeds. Armed with a stepladder, a tape measure, and a level, I set out to mount the bird feeder on a window of my office.

I thought the office would be the perfect spot because I’m
always more than willing to watch birds instead of working. I measured the window so I could place the feeder in the exact center of the window. I used the level to make sure the feeder was, well, level. I filled the feeder trays with black-oil sunflower seeds. I put the same number of seeds in each tray. It was scientific research. I planned to discover whether more birds were right-handed or left-handed. I put the stepladder, the tape measure, and the level away and went into my office.

I stood in the middle of my office, scratching my chin and admiring my handiwork. It was perfection. No one had ever done a better job putting up a bird feeder. Then I noticed him—a squirrel on the ground near my office. I knew the squirrel. He was always getting into my feeders, flinging seed every which way, and then chewing up my poor feeders. I recognized him by his one short ear. He was missing part of the ear—I figured he lost it in a fight or that it froze off during one of our nasty winters. He was a wily veteran. I watched the squirrel looking up at my new feeder perfectly placed in the center of my office window. I could swear that I saw the squirrel scratching his chin. I knew what was happening. The aggravating squirrel was doing geometric equations in his head. He was trying to figure out how to get from where he was to where my new feeder was located. I remember thinking that I had him this time. I thought that there was no way that the bushytail could get his paws on this feeder. I had a squirrel-proof feeder. There was an eave overhanging the window by some distance and an eaves trough (rain gutter) attached to the end of that. I knew the squirrel would try. That’s its job.

I expected to hear the pitter-patter of little squirrel feet on the roof of my office, and I was not disappointed. I recognized his walk. I wasn’t worried. I knew that, for once, I had this squirrel licked. There was no way he was going to get to my new feeder—the perfect feeder. I had to laugh a little as I watched the squirrel’s furry head hanging down from the eavestrough as it peeked at the feeder. I watched as the squirrel hung by his rear toenails from the eavestrough. I kept watching as he began to swing back and forth. After much of this swinging, the squirrel made his move. He launched himself from the gutter towards the world’s perfect feeder. He fell several feet short of his goal and plummeted to the ground. I almost felt sorry for him. If it had been any other squirrel, I would have had a little sympathy for him.

The blue jays were laughing at him and the chipmunks were chuckling at him. Squirrels are nothing if they are not optimistic. The squirrel gathered his bruised ego and pitter-pattered
back onto my roof. Once again, I saw the little head eyeing my feeder. His eyes shifted back and forth rapidly. He was recalculating. I saw the swinging and the second launch of the squirrel. It was every bit as much of a failure as his first attempt. It was pitiful. A crowd had begun to gather—grackles, chickadees, woodpeckers, sparrows, and rabbits. There is nothing quite as intriguing as a fallen hero. After each failure, the squirrel dusted himself off and climbed to the roof once more. I watched the squirrel fail and fall to the ground many times. I should have been working, but I was really enjoying the trials and tribulations that the furry pest was going through. I decided that I was going to watch one more attempt by the squirrel and then I was going to get on with my day.

I watched the squirrel’s head drop from the trough. There was something different about it this time. The squirrel had a look in its eyes like the look an Olympic pole-vaulter has in his final attempt. The athlete knows that if he doesn’t do it this time, he goes home without a medal. The squirrel had the same look.

I watched as the squirrel hung by its rear toenails and began to sway. Please don’t attempt this at home. Squirrels are trained professionals. This time, when it launched its assault at my perfect feeder, the squirrel bent his little squirrel knees (if squirrels have knees) and pushed off from the eavestrough. The squirrel flew through the air with the greatest of ease until he smashed into my window like George of the Jungle hitting a tree. He hit face first. His upper lip caught on the glass. The rest of the squirrel joined the lip and slid down my office window leaving a trail of squirrel spit as it did so. He found his way to my squirrel-proof feeder.

The squirrel ignored my pounding on the window—he was a cagey veteran and knew that he was safe behind the invisible, protective shield—and ate his fill of the sunflower seeds. He threw seeds down to the jays who had been laughing at him and the chipmunks who had been chuckling at him. They bowed to him in a manner that demonstrated that they were not worthy.

Then to show his utter disdain for me, the squirrel took a big bite out of my new and perfect feeder. The squirrel could get to the feeder any time he wanted to. All it took for him was a trip onto the roof, a couple of swings while hanging from the rain gutter, and a face-first crash into the window.

If squirrels were allowed into the Olympic Games, they would win all of the gold medals.

We can learn from squirrels. If we want something, we should not give up easily.
Wendy Morgan’s Greeting Cards

Celebrate the holiday season in top birding style with this charming greeting card set from Crane Creek Graphics. It features 10 of artist Wendy Morgan’s beautiful bird designs, including screech owl, hummingbird, great-homed owl, great blue heron, nuthatch, woodpecker, common loon, chickadee, northern cardinal, and raven prints, all depicted in festive wintertime scenes. The inside greeting for each card reads, “May you have a Happy Holiday and a Joyous New Year.”

Ruby-throated hummingbirds are naturally red and green, and these festive cards say “May you have a Happy Holiday and a Joyous New Year.”

4 ½ x 6 ¼ inches, printed in the USA on 100 percent post-consumer waste recycled paper. Box of 10 cards/envelopes. **$14.95**

Charley Harper Is in the House!

Make 2021 your most wonderful year yet with a Charley Harper calendar. Geometric shapes, intricate patterns, and bold colors combine to create the beautifully detailed birds, insects, animals, and trees for which Harper (1922–2007) is so famous. Grosbeaks, kingbirds, a tundra swan, and other creatures grace the pages of the mini (6½ x 14 in. open) wall calendar. Dazzling depictions of heron, pelican, quetzal, nuthatches, cardinals, and so much more are among the 12 images in the large (12 x 26 in. open) wall calendar. And if you prefer to keep your life organized in an analog planner, the 2021 engagement calendar features 32 illustrations, calendar grids, and seven-day spreads for keeping notes.

**Charley Harper Wall Calendar $14.99**
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