

Pinyon Jay

For even experienced birders, misidentifications are part of the game. There are too many variables to be correct 100% of the time. For people living in Pinyon/Juniper (PJ) forests north of the Tri-city area, one of the more common misidentifications we hear at the shop goes something like this: "We have a large group of *bluebirds* that are at our seed feeders! They're loud and very pushy with the other birds." We hear the term "bluebird" used a lot, and while we do have two separate species of bluebird that occur here, a description of the behavior of the mystery bird often tells another story. Without any other information, we can be reasonably sure that what this person actually has, are a group of Pinyon Jays.

Behavior is HUGE when it comes to bird identification, arguably more important than what the bird looks like. In low light conditions, it will very often be what determines your ID. To have a layman's description given to an experienced birder, WHAT the bird was doing is often the most valuable piece of information.

So, how did we know that the birds in question were Pinyon Jays, instead of bluebirds? They both share the predominately blue color palette, so that's of little help. The given habitat is a big clue, although it would not be uncommon to see either Western or Mountain bluebirds in the PJ during the winter months, so we're not there yet. The large group perhaps? Maybe. But while Pinyon Jays are known to be in flocks numbering in the dozens or even the hundreds, a large flock of Mountain Bluebirds can also be a common occurrence. Here's where we start to get a clearer picture though...the aggression of the described birds and what they were eating steers us in a very distinct direction when given with the other clues. Bluebirds will almost never be seen at a seed feeder, as they are almost exclusively insect and berry eaters. In general, they are also a mild-mannered species and while they can be vocal, they exhibit a much more melodic repertoire of sounds when compared to the harsh sounding screeches of the Pinyon Jay. Pinyon Jays, being a jay, can also be quite territorial with other species and will pick a yard full of seed feeders clean in a whirlwind of blue flashes and nasally calls.

It can be interesting to wonder how these two species, which can both occur in overwhelming numbers, can cohabitate in the relatively sparse PJ forests of Central and Northern AZ. While they both have a ravenous diet, bluebirds will gorge themselves on the plentiful juniper berries while the Pinyon Jays tend to go to their namesake, the calorie and nutrient-packed Pinyon nut. They use their multi-tool of a beak to expose the nut, which is concealed in the small, compact and sap-covered cones of their parent tree. Both avian species will gladly snatch up any insects that they find along the way, which provides pest control for both species of trees and the consumption of their fruit helps to propagate the given species through dispersion in the bird's droppings and caching of food. Inside of a completely self-sustaining system, the birds instinctively cultivate, fertilize, protect and harvest an entire crop every year, year over year.

In an example of how a species has adapted to its food of choice, Pinyon Jays lack feathers at the base of their beaks, which other Corvid (Jays, Ravens, Crows, Magpies) species have. These feathers would generally cover and protect their nostrils, but the lack of feathers allows them to insert the length of their beak into tightly packed pinyon cones without gumming up their feathers with sticky pine pitch. They also cache food to save for leaner times, so they are able to fit up to 40 pinyon nuts in their pouch-like throat in order to be more efficient with their foraging. Like many species, they rely on strength in numbers in order to detect predators and find food, while also maintaining a fairly complex social structure within the group. In areas where the regional Pinyon crop is lackluster, they will show off their nomadic spirit and shift their range to more plentiful crops, leaving an area entirely in some years.

Pinyon Jays are spread throughout the PJ forests and high deserts of the Western United States. Anderson Mesa, which runs along the north shore of Flagstaff's Lake Mary, has been designated as an Important Bird Area by the federal government for its importance in supporting the Pinyon Jay as a species. Finding them is often happenstance, but look and listen for their quail-like calls while in flight, their propensity to flock in huge numbers and for their uniformly powder blue color pattern. Get out and enjoy the birds!