

Tuesday Club Nature Notes

with Jan Flamank



THE EURASIAN JAY

Garrulus Glandarius from the Latin for ‘noisy acorn eater’

A medium sized member of the corvid family of birds, all of whom are incredibly intelligent, the jay is the brightest coloured of them all. It is about the same size as a pigeon, 13 inches long, and with a wingspan of 22 inches. But it remains elusive, even with its striking plumage and harsh, loud alarm call.

This is because they are woodland birds, favouring oak woods as well as living in coniferous, mixed forests, so are less likely to be seen in gardens or parkland. This is changing due to the loss of their traditional habitats, so they are adapting to living closer to us in more urban environments, which are called ‘analogue habitats’ and include our

gardens and parks. You’ll be very lucky if they come to your garden, but you will need to have mature trees for them to visit.

Widespread, the jay we see is one of more than 30 species, all with colourful distinct plumage. Both sexes are very similar, with the lovely blue flash on the outer wing feathers. This glorious patch of colour led to it being heavily persecuted and shot in Victorian times, as the blue feathers were used to decorate hats and other desired accessories. Thankfully, this vile practice has mostly ceased, and their numbers are now stable.

Rarely straying very far beyond their birthplace, each autumn our resident UK population is swollen by jays moving west from Europe, when food is scarce. Sometimes we have huge numbers joining us, which is called an irruption, due to extreme continental weather.

Autumn is the time for stocking our larders, and unusually for birds, jays are well known for hoarding nuts. They are especially fond of acorns and beech nuts, and when they have eaten their fill, they carry the nuts in their beaks to a favoured spot and either bury it, cover it with leaf litter, or jam them into crevices in tree bark. A single jay has been known to hide as many as 5,000 acorns in one season, which is an impressive pantry! Although they have excellent memories, not all the acorns are re-found, so jays are also fantastic at helping new oak saplings establish, away from the parent tree.

Jay also eat insects, invertebrates, berries, fruits and also small mammals and eggs and chicks of small birds. Their omnivorous diet and ability to adapt to changing habitats helps them to survive better than many other birds. They have an average lifespan of 4 years, although one ringed jay survived for over 16 years.

They are predated by gamekeepers, tawny owls, sparrowhawks, peregrines and goshawks, and will work together, 'mobbing' roosting owls in the daytime. Another fascinating behaviour that jays exhibit is 'anting'. This is when the jay seeks out an ant nest, then picks up ants in its beak and rubs them all over their wings, or simply lets the ants crawl over it. Feeling threatened, the ants release formic acid, which kills any parasites, bacterial and fungal infections that the jay may have. This may also be a way for the jay to ensure the ant has released its formic acid before eating it, so it tastes more palatable.

Corvids are some of my most favourite birds, all highly intelligent - tool users, able to plan ahead, often very sociable and collaborative in how they live - and the jay is the most gorgeously coloured and easily recognisable of this clever family of birds.