



This is my seed table: Aggressive behavior toward another Blue Jay. Blue Jays scare away other birds and devour the sunflower seeds and wild bird food provided.

One of the things I appreciate most about living in the Upper Keys is the amount of birds and wildlife seen here every day. Everywhere I look there is life; it's almost like nature could be taken for granted. In stark contrast to the urban areas to the north, and even in the Keys, just 100 miles south and west in Key West, there are far fewer critters.

So why is it when folks visit our tropical archipelago, the first thing they want to do is go to Key West because it is on their "bucket list?" There's a lot Key West has to offer that we lack here, such as traffic and parking problems, tacky t-shirt shops, touristy bars, and people-watching... why do you think they call it Key Weird?

Yes, there is the diving and snorkeling, and the Dry Tortugas are a must see, but lets face it, what Key West is truly lacking is the Blue Jay! Cornell Ornithology eBird database lists only two reported sightings of Blue Jays in the Key West/Stock Island area in the last 10 years.

The Blue Jay is one of the most familiar and recognizable birds, and is a permanent resident of eastern North America, all the way through Florida, ending at Marathon in the Florida Keys.

So why are Blue Jays rare in Key West?

It has to do with the Blue Jays' diet. They like acorns... so much so that Blue Jays have been credited with the proliferation of oak forests in their range. The natural range for oaks in Florida ends at the mainland near Homestead. There are scattered live oak trees in the Middle and Upper Keys, these oaks having been planted since oak trees are not native here. Key West has zero oak trees and therefore no acorns. (Though I'm sure there's a few nuts down there.)

Part of the reason they can survive here is that Blue Jays are omnivorous; they have a varied diet consisting of fruit, seeds, nuts, insects, spiders and



Side view of an alert Blue Jay at the seed table.



A quick loop to make sure the other bird got the message.



Now where were we? The Blue Jay resumes its meal.

small living creatures such as mice, and the eggs and hatchlings from bird nests. John James Audubon depicted Jays raiding a mourning dove's nest--but stomach analyses show eggs and chicks comprise an insignificant portion of their diet.



Their tendency to "cache" or stash their bounty near their breeding sites, ensures against going hungry, which is why they return to the feeder for multiple helpings.

Anyone who has ever watched a Blue Jay at a bird feeder understands that they are voracious eaters. Blue Jays disrupt the other birds, overpowering smaller and less aggressive birds, scaring away other birds near their food. In their pursuit of never going

Blue Jay... CONTINUED - *Photos by Carol Ellis*

hungry, they can collect up to six acorns at a time, using their throat as a pouch to transport their cache to their breeding grounds, where they bury the acorns. Because Blue Jays don't remember where they hide every acorn, they have been credited with propagating oak forests.

Blue Jays are beautiful birds. Did you know that it is nearly impossible to differentiate between a male and female Blue Jay since males and females share the same plumage? For the gender neutral crowd, Key West sounds like the perfect spot if you were a Blue Jay. One way you are able to tell males and females apart is by their size, since male Jays are slightly larger.

The world is pretty confusing these days... not everything is as it seems. Blue Jays are not really blue!

The Blue Jays' feathers are actually brown but we perceive them as blue because of a phenomenon called light scattering, according to the Cornell Lab of Ornithology. The pigment in Blue Jay feathers is melanin, which is brown. The blue color is caused



Blue Jay close-up, with its crest relaxed.

by scattering light through modified cells on the surface of the feather barbs.

Jays have bright blue top feathers, with white underneath. Their wings and tail are streaked with black, their tail has white outer feathers. They have a black "chinstrap" from ears down to chest, and the head sports a blue crest which lays flat when the bird is at ease. The crest stands up when in an aggressive posture. Blue Jays lower their crests when they are feeding peacefully.

The Blue Jay's heavy neck muscles rival those of the woodpecker. It has a straight black bill which can pierce dense acorns or eat locusts and grasshoppers, fare usually too big for smaller birds to handle.

The Blue Jay, also known as Jaybirds, are members of the crow family, which explains why they are large, loud and domineering. It kind of reminds me of the characteristics we see too often in our fellow humans whom I try to avoid. What Blue Jays do is part of a natural balance and shouldn't be judged as either good or bad.



The Blue Jay is a well-tuned feeding machine, possessing the ability to flick seeds into its stout beak.



They can hold multiple seeds at the same time. Blue Jays use their throat as a pouch to collect as many as six acorns.

CAROL ELLIS has lived in South Florida her entire life and Key Largo for 40 years.

Currently a Master Gardener volunteer, Carol has a degree in Journalism from the University of Florida and is the resident photographer /artist at Ocean Reef Club.



Just Folks by Edgar A. Guest

Blue Jay

All Winter long the blue jay stays,
When richer throated birds have fled.
About the cedar tree he plays
And Waits our daily gift of bread
The men who claim to know him best
Insist he's cousin to the crow,
A feathered robber, gayly dressed,
Not fit for decent birds to know.
Of morals he has none at all;
of manners, really very few.
There is no music in his call;
his charm lies in his coat of blue.
And yet I like him just for this:
On many a dismal Winter day,
When all the other birds I miss,
this fellow's brave enough to stay.