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Capitol Hill Arts Workshop

545 7th St, SE (2 blocks south of the Eastern Market metro)

Spotted on the Hill
Barracks Row Happenings
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South by West
I Must Be Out Motoring

spotted on the hill



Text and Photo by Peter Vankevich

This month's feature bird is a familiar but somewhat notorious Capitol Hill resident. The Blue Jay (*Cyanocitta cristata*) is perhaps not on the top five favorite list of birdfeeder observers or its peers, i.e. other birds. Do jays deserve such a bad rap? Let's take a look.

A member of the corvidae family that includes crows, Blue Jays are unmistakable and easily identified. Large, up to 12 inches from bill to tail, they have a distinctive crest along with various shades of blue on the upperparts that are mixed with black and white streaks. The belly area is whitish as is the face which is surrounded by a distinctive black collar.

Even if you do not see a Blue Jay, you may still know that one is in the area as they have a very distinctive loud high-pitched piercing call described as a long drawn out jay or jeer. They also have a more melodious two note call that is difficult to describe in print but a reasonable description as tull-ull or twirl-erl. They are also pretty good mimics and can reproduce the calls of the local Red-

tailed and Red-shouldered hawks in a convincing manner. Over the past couple of months I have heard them regularly on weekend mornings around the U.S. Capitol grounds and the Mall where they ramble from tree to tree.

Blue Jays are present in all of the states east of the Great Plains, preferring forest edges, parks with acorn trees and urban/suburban areas, especially those that host birdfeeders. Beginning in the 1940s they have been expanding their range into the northwest and are now breeding in all ten Canadian provinces. In the western states they are replaced by the related Stellar's Jay. Blue Jays are neither your typical migratory nor your year-round resident bird. Some birds, particularly young ones and those in the most northern range, will migrate varying distances south or west in the fall and winter and the numbers of individuals will vary greatly from year to year. Other individuals will remain in the area. Robust and resourceful, this irregular migration may be more due to whether there are adequate food supplies rather than frigid temperatures like we are

experiencing this season.

Although it is not an official U.S. state bird, it is the provincial bird of Prince Edward Island. It is also a somewhat common sports name including Toronto's Major League Baseball team as well as the teams of Johns Hopkins University.

So why is the Blue Jay not so well liked? Observers of birds at feeders will quickly tell you that when they show up, other birds leave. Larger than the others, they are considered by some to be bullies who quickly move in and take over. They also have a reputation for eating young hatchlings and eggs from other birds' nests. Research has shown however that this activity is far less common than formerly thought. Their primary food sources are seeds, especially acorns, insects and caterpillars. They also have an interesting feeding behavior which is to stash acorns by burying them. Some of the forgotten ones seed which has led to expansions of acorn trees. I guess you could see them as a kind of a Johnny Acornseed of the avian community.

One of the great American ornithologists, Arthur Cleveland Bent, has been known to wax a bit anthropomorphic on occasion in his extensive writings contained in the twenty-one volume series entitled "Life Histories of North American Birds." Perhaps siding with this bird's detractors, he described the Blue Jay as follows: "He gives us the impression of being independent, lawless, haughty, even impudent, with a disregard for his neighbors' rights and wishes--like Hotspur, as we meet him in Henry IV, part 1." With a characterization like that, perhaps our own Shakespeare Folger Library should consider adopting this bird as its mascot. Go Folger Jays - Beat L.O.C.!

If you have any comments or come across any interesting birds on the Hill that could be a feature for this column; or would like to join me in for a weekend morning bird walk on the Hill, feel free to contact me petevankevich@gmail.com ★