



CONFESSIONS OF A JAY-WATCHER

I have become a watcher of blue jays. We all are, of course. Blue jays arrive on a scene like a rogue military parade unit—dazzlingly turned out, but with complete disregard for decorum. Everybody's business is their business, and nothing of interest happens without the jays providing a running commentary. So, yes, we all notice blue jays.

I began paying more attention to them when I started carrying peanuts in an effort to increase my popularity (a strategy I recommend, if you don't mind that most of your new friends will be small, furry, and not especially polite). Priscilla, a gray squirrel I raised three years ago, shows up regularly. Once she has eaten her fill, she will bury peanuts for future consumption, an activity that is of interest to jays. They follow Priscilla and promptly retrieve each peanut as soon as she buries it.

The jays quickly learned that it was even easier to get their peanuts from the source. When they assembled, waiting for Priscilla to decide upon her route. I suggested, "Look! Look!" and tossed a peanut to the ground beneath them. After careful scrutiny, a jay would drop in vertical descent, grab the peanut and be off. Jays now assemble whenever they notice I'm outside, but even after eight months, most still act as if retrieving a peanut requires cunning and courage. They won't land within six feet of me. What is the saying about trust among thieves?

As a wildlife rehabilitator, and therefore a mother of squirrels, I am always tuned in to the conversation of

jays; they are the Emergency Broadcasting Network for all birds and mammals that feature on the menu of predators, especially avian predators. I have seen juvenile squirrels and fledgling robins in my care freeze and crouch when they hear jay alarm calls outside, despite lack of instruction from their parent; recognition of the jays' alarm call is part of their genetic inheritance.

While the alarm call is easily understood, I have found no adequate interpretations for the many other vocalizations and behaviors of blue jays. One common call sounds like a rusty water pump. Jays bob up and down while making this noise, as if doing the motions to a favorite camp song. One study suggested that males perform this song and dance while gathered around a female in a courtship flock, but I have seen pairs of birds doing this together with no other jays in sight.

More baffling are the melodious songs of jays. The songs of most songbirds are pitched to carry—to attract a mate and claim a territory. The musical song of the blue jay—extended riffs that include warbles, whistles, trills, slides, imitations of other birds ... is performed so softly as to be barely audible. The songs seem better designed for the bird's individual amusement than to convey information to other jays. I wouldn't be surprised if one day we are able to translate jay language and find them singing of their exploits of derring-do in Homeric epic form, albeit

quietly. Alternatively, after a day of swashbuckling, they might need some time for solitary artistic pursuits.

While jays might style themselves free-wheelers, they have evolved as servants of nut trees. Like squirrels, they bury surplus food for future use. One study in southern Wisconsin found that jays were able to carry fourteen beechnuts at a time (though the average transport was seven), that they selected only sound nuts for caching, and that they traveled up to four kilometers from the source tree to their cache site. Any nuts not retrieved by the jay have a reasonably good chance of germinating. Jays are likely the best means beech trees have to disperse their offspring and to enhance their genetic fitness. Oaks and jays have a similar arrangement. A study in Virginia found that blue jays transported and cached 133,000 acorns from a stand of oaks (54% of the crop), that they carried 1-5 acorns per trip, traveled a mean distance of 1.1 kilometers to their caching sites, and buried each nut individually.

Peanuts are likewise transported and cached. My boldest blue jays pause once they have seized a peanut and scan the ground for more. If they spot one, they cock their heads and stare at it intently. Are they trying to decide if they can carry one more, or are they memorizing the peanut's location so they can return for it? I suspected the latter, and decided

to test my theory by arranging a few peanuts around a distinctive visual cue, a piece of white paper. Once a jay had landed, taken a peanut, and surveyed the placement of the remaining nuts, I would move the paper several feet away to see if the jay used it as a peanut beacon. Things did not progress as planned. I already knew that differentiating my subjects would be challenging. The best means I have found to distinguish individuals is the shape of the white patch that extends from the belly up onto the pale blue/gray breast. Not only did the jays fail to display their chests before each dive, but even when they did, other jays would rearrange my study site before the identified jay returned. Still, I could see if the jays, as a group, learned to associate peanuts with the piece of paper. Because it was windy, I weighted the paper down on one side with a rock or a brick. To make it more challenging, I placed the peanuts under the paper. The jays in the peanut gallery watched. One dropped down as soon as I returned to my seat. She hopped nervously around the strange arrangement, spotted a partially exposed peanut and grabbed it. Within minutes, the jays were retrieving peanuts from beneath several weighted sheets of paper arranged across the lawn.

Even though the jays won't condescend to offer me friendship, I don't consider these peanuts wasted. Jay watching has its own rewards.

