

# California Scrub-Jay (*Aphelocoma californica*)

## Description

The California Scrub-Jay is a songbird, and a member of the Family Corvidae, which includes crows, jays and magpies. The California Scrub-Jay was known as the Western Scrub-Jay until 2016, when it was split off from the similar Woodhouse's Scrub-Jay that lives in the intermountain western states. The genus *Aphelocoma* is Greek for "smooth hair" and refers to the lack of a crest that is distinctive of other jays, such as the Stellar's Jay or Blue Jay. The species *californica* refers to the Latin form for "of California" where the species is most common. "Scrub" refers to the preferred habitat for the species.



Figure 1: Adult California Scrub-Jay (photo by Msulis, licensed under CC-BY-SA-2.5).

California Scrub-Jays are about the size of a robin – 11 to 12 inches long and weighing about 2.5 to 3.5 ounces. Adults are dull blue on the upper body and tail with a brownish-gray patch on the shoulders, and dull whitish on the underside with a blue necklace-like stripe (Figure 1). Their head is blue with a white eyebrow stripe. Beak, legs and feet are black. Eyes are brown. Males and females are similar. Juveniles lack the blue head and necklace and instead have a brownish-gray head without the white eyebrow.

## Diet and Feeding Behavior

California Scrub-Jays are opportunistic, and will eat a wide variety of food types. During spring and summer, they feed mostly on invertebrates and fruit, but in the fall and winter their diet is mostly fruits of forest trees such as acorns, pine seeds, and other nuts. They also occasionally eat eggs, nestling birds and other small vertebrates.

Scrub-Jays usually find food by hopping on the ground or on tree and shrub branches. To open acorns and other nuts, they hold the nut between the inner toes of both feet and hammer with their lower jaw until they can extract the meat of the nut.

## Reproduction

California Scrub-Jays can start breeding when they are just one year old – if they can find a mate. Many do not breed, however, until they are two or three years old. Once pairs are established, they both construct a nest that is usually 6 to 12 feet high in a shrub or tree, but may be as high as 50 feet in a pine or oak tree. Nests usually are very well hidden. It takes an average of 13 days for the pair to complete a cup-shaped nest made of sticks and lined with plant fibers, fine rootlets and hair. One egg is laid each day until reaching an average clutch size of 4 eggs. Incubation begins with the last or next-to-last egg, and only the female incubates the eggs.

Incubation lasts about 18 days, with hatching usually occurring in the same order the eggs were laid, though it may occur over several days if incubation starts before the last egg is laid. Chicks hatch naked, with eyes closed, and weighing less than 0.2 ounces. The female warms the chicks until they are feathered. Both parents feed the chicks mostly invertebrates (insects), but older chicks may get acorn fragments. The chicks fledge (leave the nest) when they're about 20 days old, but they cannot fly yet, so they spend their days climbing in the vegetation near the nest and begging for food. The parents continue to feed the fledglings for about one month after they leave the nest, at which point the youngsters are able to fly and feed themselves.

California Scrub-Jays usually produce only one successful brood per season, though if a first nest attempt fails, they usually try again. Studies have shown that first nests of the year produce an average of 0.91 fledglings per nest. Second

# California Scrub-Jay (*Aphelocoma californica*)

nesting attempts usually have a lower success rate. Also, older pairs are considerably more successful than first year pairs.

## Distribution and Habitat

California Scrub-Jays live mostly in oak savannahs and shrubby forest-edge habitats in Washington, Oregon, California, and the Baja peninsula (Figure 2). Their beaks are well adapted for the types of foods they find (i.e., acorns vs piñon pine seeds preferred by Woodhouse's Scrub-Jay). At the Refuge, California Scrub-Jays are often found in the oak savannah and habitat edges along Rock Creek and Tualatin River.

The highest densities of California Scrub-Jays are found in California and western Oregon. Based on long-term trends reported by the Breeding Bird Survey, populations of Scrub-Jays are declining slightly in the more-arid, desert areas. However, populations are generally increasing in Oregon and southwestern Washington. In fact, the range of Scrub-Jays has expanded in recent decades in western Oregon and Washington as residential development in low-elevation corridors has opened forest canopies and created more shrubby edge habitats.

## Conservation

California Scrub-Jays are listed as a Species of Least Concern by the International Union for the Conservation of Nature. They are generally tolerant (some would say bold) around humans, and in many locations in western Oregon they actually benefit from humans changing the landscape. Since a favorite food is acorns, this rarely brings them into conflict with humans, but in local filbert farms they can be a nuisance.

Scrub-Jays may be indirectly affected by a fungal pathogen, *Phytophthora ramorum*, which causes Sudden Oak Death in acorn-producing species in northern California and part of Curry County in southwestern Oregon. First discovered in 2003, the pathogen is now the focus of an active quarantine program. The white oaks in the Willamette Valley aren't much affected by the pathogen, but concerns remain that the pathogen could spread and kill other species of trees in forests in Oregon. A decrease in acorn availability won't hurt the Scrub-Jays that much, but could cause greater declines in other species, like Acorn Woodpeckers.

## Fun Facts

- Like their cousins the American Crow, Scrub-Jays are very vocal with a loud, distinctive and raucous call.
- California Scrub-Jays have what appears to be a funeral when they find a dead jay. They will make loud calls over the body, which attracts other jays, and will stay near the body for a day or two.
- California Scrub-Jays can be mischievous, and have been caught stealing acorns from Acorn Woodpeckers and other Scrub-Jays. They often look around for other jays before hiding their own acorns.
- Once a Scrub-Jay is established as a breeder, it spends almost all of its time throughout the year defending its territory.
- The oldest wild California Scrub-Jay ever recorded was 15 years and 9 months old (from banding records).



Figure 2: Range of California Scrub-Jay (from All About Birds, Cornell Lab of Ornithology, [https://www.allaboutbirds.org/guide/California\\_Scrub-Jay/maps-range](https://www.allaboutbirds.org/guide/California_Scrub-Jay/maps-range)).

# California Scrub-Jay (*Aphelocoma californica*)

## Resources

1. Gruson ES. 1972. Words for birds: A lexicon of North American birds. New York, NY: Quadrangle Books.
2. California Scrub-Jay. 2018. Ithaca, NY: Cornell Lab of Ornithology,; [accessed 03 May 2018].  
<https://www.allaboutbirds.org>.
3. Curry RL, Peterson AT, Langen TA, Pyle P, Patten MA. 2017. California scrub-jay (*Aphelocoma californica*), version 3.0. In: Rodewald PG, editor. The birds of North America. Ithaca, NY: Cornell Laboratory of Ornithology.
4. Sauer JR, Niven DK, Hines JE, Ziolkowski DJ, Jr, Pardieck KL, Fallon JE, Link WA. 2017. The North American breeding bird survey, results and analysis 1966 - 2015. Version 2.07.2017. Laurel, MD: Patuxent Wildlife Research Center, US Geological Survey. Web site: <http://www.mbr-pwrc.usgs.gov/bbs/>
5. The IUCN Red List of threatened species. 2018. Cambridge, UK; [accessed 03 May 2018].  
<http://www.iucnredlist.org>.
6. Oregon officials find new cases of sudden oak death six miles north of quarantine zone. 2011. The Oregonian. [accessed 05/02/2018][http://www.oregonlive.com/pacific-northwest-news/index.ssf/2011/09/oregon\\_officials\\_find\\_new\\_case.html](http://www.oregonlive.com/pacific-northwest-news/index.ssf/2011/09/oregon_officials_find_new_case.html).
7. Monahan WB, Koenig WD. 2006. Estimating the potential effects of sudden oak death on oak-dependent birds. Biological Conservation. 127(2):146-157.
8. Western Scrub-Jay. 2018. Merrifield, VA: The National Wildlife Federation; [accessed 2018].  
<https://www.nwf.org/Home/Educational-Resources/Wildlife-Guide>.
9. Dally JM, Emery NJ, Clayton NS. 2006. Food-caching Western Scrub-Jays keep track of who was watching when. Science. 312(5780):1662-1665.