



WILDLIFE NOTES

Piñon jay

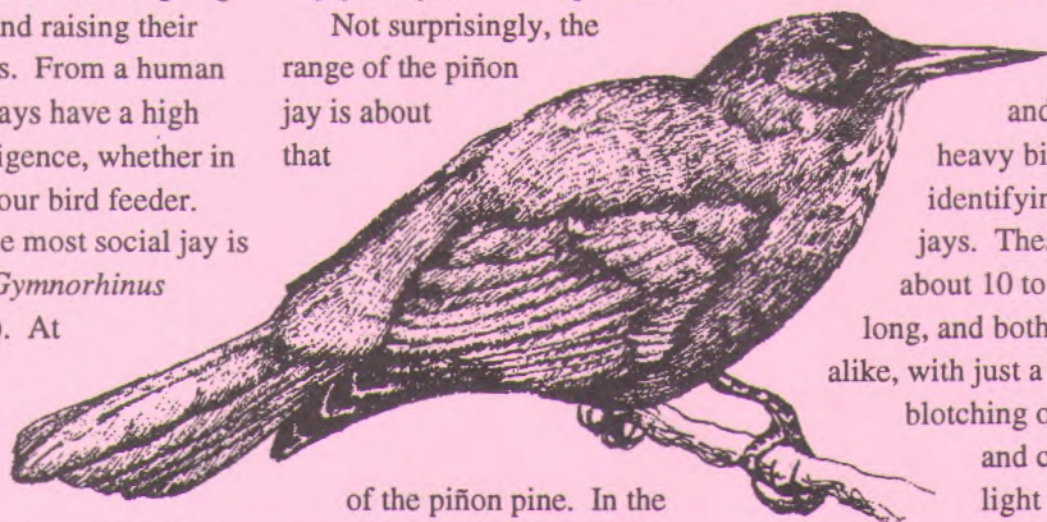
Several species of raucous jays inhabit New Mexico. They are in the same family (*Corvidae*) as magpies and crows. Jays feed with every opportunity, descending to lower elevations in winter or drought when piñon nuts are scarce. They tend to be outgoing birds, feeding and raising their young in groups. From a human point of view, jays have a high degree of intelligence, whether in the wild or at your bird feeder.

Perhaps the most social jay is the piñon jay (*Gymnorhinus cyanocephalus*). At nesting time, primarily in March, birds commute between nesting grounds and the main feeding group. Do they communicate beyond vocal calls and eye contact? You may see a flock of jays commuting over the foothills, loudly calling in flight. They gather into a compact mass when a Cooper's hawk or a falcon passes overhead, then dash into cover and remain completely silent until the threat has passed.

Why do jays flock? This probably makes it easier for them to obtain food supplies, and

enables young birds to learn about dangers and about food and water supplies from older birds. By assembling in flocks, they may be more difficult for predators to kill. A couple of dozen pairs of eyes can see more than two, and a mob of jays may confuse a predator.

Not surprisingly, the range of the piñon jay is about that



of the piñon pine. In the summer, this translates into elevations of about 5,500 to 7,400 feet, which in New Mexico is a wide distribution. When there is little piñon nut or oak acorn production, birds wander far and wide in the fall in search of food. Some fly south to Mexico or to neighboring states.

Piñon jays will lay eggs from late February to October, depending on the availability of food and how severe the weather has been. They build nests of twigs, bark,

and weed stems, one to an oak or pine tree. Colonies of nests are commonly found. These may be lined with dry grass, weed fiber, and feathers. Usually, the clutch consists of four eggs, bluish white, covered with brown spots.

Look for a uniform

grayish-blue color

and a long,

heavy bill when identifying piñon

jays. These birds are about 10 to 11 inches

long, and both sexes look alike, with just a little white

blotching on the head

and cheeks and a light underside.

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