

The First Record of Pinyon Jay (*Gymnorhinus cyanocephalus*) in British Columbia.

By Rick Toochin. Submitted: April 15, 2018.

Introduction and Distribution

The Pinyon Jay (*Gymnorhinus cyanocephalus*) is a relatively non-migratory species that occurs mostly in the western United States from central Oregon at Klamath and Lake Counties, north into Jefferson County (Gilligan *et al.* 1994). This species is also found in the mountains and arid slopes of eastern California in Siskiyou and Modoc Counties, southeast to eastern Nevada County, and east El Dorado County south to north Kern and east San Bernardino County, and in south California in southwestern San Bernardino, western Riverside, and northeastern San Diego County (Garrett and Dunn 1981, Grenfell and Laudenslayer 1983, Small 1994), in northern Baja California from Sierra de Juárez and Sierra San Pedro Mártir (Howell and Webb 2010), in Nevada, except extreme north and south, south-eastern Idaho (Stephens and Sturts 1998), Utah, northern Arizona, south to central Mohave, northern Yavapai, and northern Graham Counties (Balda 2002), central portions of the southern half of Montana (Montana Bird Distribution Committee 1996), western and central Wyoming (Oakleaf *et al.* 1992), western South Dakota, mainly in Black Hills, but possibly other areas (Peterson 2012), north-western Nebraska where this species summers in the Scotts Bluff County and Pine Ridge region, including Sioux County, but breeding only recently documented in Nebraska (Sharpe *et al.* 2001b), western and southern Colorado in east to Larmer, El Paso, and Baca County (Dexter 1998e), extreme western Oklahoma in Cimarron County (Baumgartner and Baumgartner 1992), and portions of New Mexico west of eastern plains, south to Mogollon and Sacramento highlands (Hubbard 1978c). Although this species is closely associated with Piñon Pines (*Pinus edulis*, *P. monophylla*, and *P. cembroides*), in most areas, individuals found in areas north of the range of these trees inhabit woodlands and scrublands with Ponderosa Pines (*Pinus ponderosa*), junipers, and various chaparral vegetation (Balda 2002).

The Pinyon Jay is generally considered a non-migratory species, but a limited migration is possible at the northern edges of this species' range (Bendire 1895). Individuals have been documented moving or irrupting into areas not normally inhabited when pinecone crops fail within regular range (Westcott 1964a). Stragglers may move as far east as central Oklahoma (Baumgartner and Baumgartner 1992) and Iowa (Howell and Webb 2010), as far west as Santa Catalina Island, in California (Small 1994), and as far south as northern Sonora, in Mexico (Russell and Monson 1998). The Pinyon Jay populations can undergo irruptions out of their normal range (Balda 2002). These irruptions occur at irregular intervals, and can be of different intensities found in different parts of the range (Balda 2002). In irruptive years birds are displaced well outside their home range, which can involve hundreds of birds (Balda 2002). The Pinyon Jay will travel hundreds, or even thousands of kilometers during these movements

(Balda 2002). The period when major irruptions normally start is in late August into early September and will continue into early January, with some small irruptions occurring in the spring (Balda 2002). Most immigrants are juveniles (Balda 2002). During the fall, both males and females immigrate, but in spring, immigrants are mostly first-year females (Marzluff and Balda 1992).

The Pinyon Jay Generally winters throughout its breeding range, but when the pine-cone crop fails, may irrupt into western Oregon, northern Idaho (Balda 2002), central Montana (Balda 2002), south to southeastern California (Small 1994), southeastern Arizona (Balda 2002), northern Chihuahua, northern Sonora (Howell and Webb 2010), western and central Texas (TBRC 2017), east to western Nebraska (Balda 2002), western Kansas (Balda 2002). The Pinyon Jay is a casual vagrant in North Dakota (Balda 2002), coastal California to Santa Catalina Island, also to Death Valley and south Salton Sea (Small 1994), east to Iowa (IOURC 2017), and from southern Washington (Wahl *et al.* 2005, WBRC 2016).

In Canada, the Pinyon Jay is an accidental vagrant with a specimen record from Eastend, Maple Creek County, in southwestern Saskatchewan September 16, 1910 (Bent 1946a). This species is accidental in Alberta with a single photographed bird found at Mountain View from 11-12 October 2007 (Hudon *et al.* 2008). There is also a single photographed record from British Columbia from the East Kootenay region (Asquith and Dennington 2005).

Identification and Similar Species

The Pinyon Jay is shown in all standard North American field guides. This species is a small-medium sized jay that is crestless measuring 27 cm in length, with a wingspan of 48 cm, and weighing 100 grams (Sibley 2000, Dunn and Alderfer 2011). In the context of British Columbia, the Pinyon Jay is so different looking from any regularly occurring jay species, that identification should be fairly straight-forward.

The following description of the Pinyon Jay is taken from Balda (2002), unless otherwise stated.

Birds in adult plumage are entirely dull blue, except the whitish streaked chin, throat, and breast. The inner webs of the primaries are black. Both sexes are alike except the crown is slightly deeper blue on the male. The eyes are chocolate brown. The bill is sharply pointed and the tail shorter than on other jay species (Bateman and Balda 1973). The bill averages longer on the male, with adult male, measuring 35.34 mm and adult female, measuring 33.18 mm (Ligon and White 1974). The mouth lining and bill of adult birds is black. Juvenile birds have a uniformly mouse-gray plumage and flesh coloured to pink legs and feet. Immature birds are similar to adult birds, but the plumage is overall duller.

Pinyon Jay is easily distinguished from all other jays by the combination of an overall blue colour, shorter tail, and lack of a crest. The California Scrub-Jay (*Aphelocoma californica*) has blue upper-parts, but contrastingly whitish to grayish under-parts. The Steller's Jay (*Cyanocitta stelleri*) and Blue Jay (*C. cristata*) have crests and black markings on the head.

The Pinyon Jay has a social organization that differs from those of other jay species found in North America (Brown 1974b, Marzluff and Balda 1988b). This species is extremely social; rarely observed individually, except sometimes during irruption years when out of range vagrants can occur (Balda 2002). The Pinyon Jay forages ubiquitously, often walking, not hopping, on the ground (Balda 2002). This species calls constantly in flight, giving a soft, conversational series of “hoi hoi hoi” or a single “hoya” sound (Sibley 2000). The Pinyon Jay also gives a series of harsher rising “kwee kwee kwee” notes and a loud, clear, nasal “waoow” call (Sibley 2000). During the fall, this species makes long-distance flights in large flocks (Balda 2002).

Occurrence and Documentation

The Pinyon Jay is an accidental vagrant in British Columbia with the only record involving a 1st year female that was photographed by Kim Asquith and Malcolm Dennington coming to their bird feeder at Lister, near Creston from February 11- April 5, 2005 (Asquith and Dennington 2005). This bird's occurrence is almost certainly the result of an irruption year. Pinyon Jays are prone to irrupt out of their core range when their primary food source of pinecone crops fails (Westcott 1964a). This species should be looked for in the future in the dry interior zone where Ponderosa Pine trees are abundant and during periods when it is known there are widespread pinecone failures in the birds' core range.

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