

Gray Jay

(*Perisoreus canadensis*)

BY JOHN FRALEY

When I think of gray jays, also known as camp robbers, I think of wilderness. While hiking mountain forests and ridges in summer, I see these quirky, medium-sized birds all the way up to the tree line. In winter, they often keep me company while hunting or cross-country skiing in the backcountry.

Though gray jays embody wilderness, they can be surprisingly tame. Montana mountain hikers, campers, and other travelers are familiar with the bird's habit of boldly panhandling for food, going so far as to fly into camp and grab items off plates. Feeding any wild animal is not a good idea,

but with gray jays it can be almost impossible to keep these "robbers" away from your lunch.

APPEARANCE The gray jay is a member of the family Corvidae, which includes jays, crows, ravens, and magpies. Handsome with fluffy plumage, the gray jay looks like an overgrown chickadee. It averages about 10 to 12 inches long and has a wingspan of 18 inches. The bill is short and black, while the back and head are gray. The white underside extends across the throat and down the breast to the tail area (though in western Montana, the jay's underside is often light gray, not white).

Other identifiable characteristics are its short, gray wings, black eyes and legs, and gray tail feathers tipped with white.

MORE ABOUT FOOD This bird is truly omnivorous, eating everything from live beetles to dead deer. Gray jays consume berries and a variety of insects, notably grasshoppers, caterpillars, bees, and wasps. During winter, they eat lichens, as well as carrion and even the occasional small, live rodent.

Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks biologist Dwight Bergeron, a bird expert, has observed family groups of 30 or more gray jays hunting along forest edges like a roving pack of miniature, airborne wolves. During spring and early summer, says Bergeron, gray jays sometimes snatch young birds right from the nest.

Like many animals that live in Montana year-round, the gray jay caches food for winter consumption. But unlike any other

species, the gray jay hides clumps of berries and other edibles by sticking them to the undersides of tree branches or in holes in dead trees. It does this using a sticky mucous secreted from the side of its beak. Scientists believe this trait enables the gray jay (whose genus name *Perisoreus* means "hoarder") to survive in the high country during winter.

SOUND The most commonly heard of the gray jay's mostly mellow sounds include the clucking *ca, ca, ca*, and a soft whistle. When alarmed, the jay emits a screeching *jaaaay* call.

REPRODUCTION Gray jays breed in coniferous forests. After choosing a nest site in a tree up to 30 feet high, the male starts building the nest using twigs, grass, bark, and moss. The female then joins him to complete the nest, which she lines with feathers and other soft materials. Gray jays will breed from March through May. The female lays three to four eggs and incubates them for two to three weeks. The young, which are fed by both the male and the female, can fly after roughly four weeks.

HABITAT Gray jays live almost exclusively in remote coniferous forests and venture into high country containing scattered snags or conifers. Though they act tame around humans, gray jays stay away from towns, ranches, and other settlements. Like magpies, chickadees, and a few other hardy bird species, they do not migrate.

STATUS Gray jays are common throughout their range, which extends along the Rocky Mountains from Alaska south to northern New Mexico, Arizona, and California. A breeding bird survey conducted across the West from the mid-1980s to the mid-1990s showed the birds were increasing in number, but no one is sure why.

In Montana, gray jays are common in forested mountains. Bergeron says recent breeding bird surveys show that their populations have been stable to slightly increasing over the last ten years. 🐿️

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