



Thorndon Birdlife

September 2023

The **jays** we see or hear in our gardens are Eurasian jays and the Latin name for the Eurasian jay is ***garrulus glandarius*** '*garrulus*' meaning noisy or chatty and '*glandarius*' meaning 'of acorns' There are no jays without acorns (and much fewer oaks without jays)

Acorns are the primary food source for a jay. One bird can hide between 4,500 and 11,000 acorns. They store them for up to 10 months at a time. There is usually only one acorn in each hiding place. This means that the birds have to use foresight, planning and an incredible memory map to manage their stashes. It is a technique called scatter-hoarding. Jays are members of the corvid family (*corvidae*) They are incredibly intelligent and display complex social behaviours. For example, they seem to be able to identify potential thieves and will choose to hide their acorns behind opaque barriers when they think they are being watched.

Jays are a relatively small corvid, similar in size to a western Jackdaw (*Coloeus monedula*) with a length of 34–35 cm (13–14 in) and a wingspan of 52–58 cm (20–23 in) The nominate race has light rufous brown to a pinkish brown body plumage. The whitish throat is bordered on each side by a prominent black moustache stripe. The forehead and crown are whitish with black stripes, the rump is white and it has a stout black bill. The complex colouring on the upper surface of the wing includes black and white bars and a prominent bright blue patch with fine black bars. The tail is mainly black and sexes are similar.

Although they are the most colourful members of the corvid family, jays are actually quite difficult to see. They inhabit deciduous and coniferous woodlands, parks and mature gardens, rarely moving far from cover. The screaming call usually lets you know a jay is nearby and it is usually given when a bird is on the move, so watch for a bird flying between the trees with its distinctive flash of white on the rump.

In order to keep its feathers free of parasites, the Eurasian jay will cover itself in ants, which release formic acid to kill any unwanted stragglers. This behaviour is known as anting.

The most characteristic call, of the **jay**, is a harsh, rasping screech that is used upon sighting various predators and as an advertising call. The jay is well known for its mimicry, often sounding so like a different species that it is difficult to distinguish its true identity unless the bird is seen. It will imitate the calls of birds of prey such as the mew of the common buzzard and the cackle of the northern goshawk.



Eurasian jays normally first breed when two years of age, although they occasionally breed when only one year. Both sexes build the nest which is usually placed in a fork or on a branch of a tree close to the main trunk, occasionally the nest is located on a building. The nest has a base of twigs and a lining of thinner twigs, roots, grass, moss and leaves. The eggs are laid daily, normally early in the morning. The clutch is 3–6 eggs which are pale green to pale olive brown and are covered with fine darker speckles. They sometimes have brown or black streaks concentrated at the broader end. They are incubated by the female and hatch after 16–19 days. While she is on the nest the male brings her food. Both parents feed and care for the young which fledge after 19–23 days. The parents continue to feed the fledgelings until they are 6–8 weeks of age. Only a single brood is raised each year.

The Eurasian Jay is connected to the life-giving essence of sunlight, and as such to sun gods more associated with fertility, the wild, and healing magic. The maximum recorded age for a jay is 16 years and 9 months for a bird in Skelton, Yorks, that was ringed in 1966 and found dead in 1983.

Garden sightings: Blackbird, Mistle Thrush, Song Thrush, Green woodpecker, Great-spotted woodpecker, Chiffchaff, Treecreeper, Blackcap, White-throat, Garden warbler (heard), Jay, Magpie, Common Buzzard x 2, Red Kite and a Blackbird sitting on its 4th brood.