Blue jays are intelligent and fascinating birds.

Did you know that the blue jay’s feathers are not actually blue? The bright sapphire color we see is, in fact, the result of the unique inner structure of the feathers, which distort the reflection of light off the bird, making it appear blue. If that structure were to be damaged by crushing the feathers, the blue color would go away. The pigment in their feathers is melanin, which is brown. The blue color is caused by scattering light through modified cells on the surface of the feather barbs. This is just one interesting feature of blue jays, which are generally considered very common songbirds. But if we take the time to learn more about these beautiful creatures, we find that they are very intelligent and fascinating animals.

Blue jays are easy to recognize by their coloration and calls. They have well-defined white faces with a bright blue crest and black markings surrounding the throat, head, bill, legs, feet and eyes. The black bridle varies extensively and may help them recognize one another. The back, wings and tail also appear blue. Male and female blue jays are almost identical in appearance. Males are just slightly larger than females. The average length for a blue jay is from nine to 12 inches and they generally weigh about two and a half to three and a half ounces with a wingspan of 13 to 17 inches.

These birds are known to be loud and somewhat aggressive. Blue jays make a wide variety of sounds that carry long distances. Different individuals use diverse calls. They call for many reasons; to warn other birds of threats, get assistance in chasing off an enemy and let others know that they are agitated. They have even been known to imitate the call of hawks. Most of the calls are produced while the jay is perched in a tree. However, they are often found around bird feeders and make the sound of “jay, jay,” thus their name. Blue jays even use calls to team up and attack potential predators that are threatening their nests.

The colorful crest is also used to communicate. It conveys the bird’s mood. When the crest is upright, the bird is excited, aggressive or surprised. If frightened, the crest will stick out in all directions and if the bird is relaxed, the crest will lay flat on its head.

Fortunately, blue jays are quite adaptable to many environments. They prefer to live and breed in mixed woods and forest edges, but they can survive and even thrive in urban areas. Blue jays are generally monogamous and they mate for life. The mating seasons starts in March and ends in July. Evergreens are the tree of preference for nests, but most anything will do. The nest is a cup-shaped structure made up of twigs, moss, plant material, paper, feathers, mud, roots and other materials that the jays may find useful. Both female and male construct the nest. Once the eggs are hatched, usually between three and six, both parents brood the young. When mother bird is sitting on the eggs, the male feeds her so she can stay put. Once the juvenile birds are fledged, the family stays and travels together until early fall. Blue jays are ready to mate at about one year. These birds are known for their tight family bonds.
Blue jays develop very strong bills which they use for cracking open nuts and acorns. They hold the object in their feet and peck it open with their bill. Although these birds have a reputation for egg stealers, most of their diet consists of grains, fruits and nuts.

When they reach adulthood, blue jays have a very unusual moulting ritual. Between June and July, they undergo a complete change of plumage. They begin the process of anting, which is using ants or any other suitable materials they can find to preen or clean their feathers.

Blue jays are very curious and intelligent birds. Young birds will play and grab bright or reflective objects and carry them around for a while. Some people have claimed that they have seen blue jays use objects such as strips of newspaper as tools to obtain food. Captive fledglings have been seen trying to open their cage doors. They are social birds and are mostly seen in pairs or family groups. When flying however, they usually fly across wide, open spaces one at a time keeping a large distance from others in flight. They are not fast flyers and usually use full and regular quick flaps of their wings. They fly with their bodies parallel to the ground at a very steady, level height.

Another sign of intelligence in these brightly colored feathered creatures is their ability to watch and wait. They are known to sit and watch humans eat, wait for them to leave, then swoop down and take anything left behind. They even watch the gardener loving plant seeds then go in and dig them up for a nice, easy meal. Blue jays are territorial and will chase other birds away from these feeding areas. They will even be aggressive toward humans if they wander too close to their nests.

Despite their reputation as an aggressive, common bird, blue jays do help other birds and humans. Their fondness for acorns and their accuracy in selecting and burying acorns that have not been infested with weevils are credited with spreading oak trees after the last glacial period. Jays also scare off many birds of prey with their loud calls and “mob attacks,” protecting other smaller birds in the area. Blue jays are comfortable around humans; unfortunately the most frequent cause of death in urban areas is from dogs and cats.