

Western Scrub-Jay

Aphelocoma californica

The “blue jay” of dry Western lowlands, the Western Scrub-Jay combines deep azure blue with dusty gray-brown and white. The rounded, crestless head immediately sets it apart from Blue Jays and Steller’s Jays. These birds are a fixture of dry shrublands, oak woodlands, and pinyon pine-juniper forests, as well as conspicuous visitors to backyards.

Keys to Identification

Size and Shape

A lanky bird with long, floppy tail and an often hunched-over posture.

Color Pattern

Blue and gray above, with a pale underside broken up by a blue necklace. In birds, the color blue depends on lighting, so Western Scrub-Jays often look simply dark

Behavior

Assertive, vocal, and inquisitive. You’ll often notice scrub-jays silhouetted high in trees, on wires, or on posts where they act as lookouts. In flight seems underpowered and slow, with bouts of fluttering alternating with glides

Habitat

Look for Western Scrub-Jays in open habitats of the West: oak woodlands and chaparral near the coast and pinyon-juniper woodlands of the interior West; also backyards, pastures, and orchards. Typically, though not always, in lower and drier habitats than Steller’s Jay.

Cool Facts

- Western Scrub-Jays have a mischievous streak, and they’re not above outright theft. They’ve been caught stealing acorns from Acorn Woodpecker caches and robbing seeds and pine cones from Clark’s Nutcrackers. They even seem aware of their guilt: some scrub-jays steal acorns they’ve watched other jays hide. When these birds go to hide their own acorns, they check first that no other jays are watching.
- The oldest known Western Scrub-Jay was 15 years 9 months old.

Measurements

Both Sexes

- Length - 11.0 - 11.8 inches
- Wingspan - 15.4 inches
- Weight - 2.5 - 3.5 ounces

