

THE BLUE JAY.

Cyanocitta Cristata.

BY W. D. DOAN, LANCASTER, PA.

This beautiful bird, the subject of our illustration, is a denizen chiefly of forest and heavy timbers, remote from civilization, and one who is nearly cosmopolitan in its distribution, being found throughout Eastern North America, from Florida and Texas, north to the fur countries. Westward, it ranges from the Atlantic Coast to the Mississippi Valley. In this section this species is a common resident; but more plentiful during the spring and summer months, than during the cold, dreary months of winter. There is a slight thinning out during the last week of November, and those that remain become gregarious, and are found frequenting thickly covered bottom lands which are mostly bordered by heavy timbers. The return movement is generally noticed by the second week in February.

In its natural haunts the Blue Jay is exceedingly sly and very suspicious, and can only be approached with the greatest difficulty; but in some localities its frequent intercourse with man has modified its disposition considerably, and confidence seems to have taken the place of distrust, which has very frequently been shown by its nesting sometimes in orchards and other suitable places, in close proximity to farm buildings. The ceremony of mating is usually accomplished with expedition, and soon after, the birds are at their nest-building, which, in this latitude, is commenced by the 25th of April: for that purpose some forest or orchard tree, and sometimes a low bush is selected; but the latter is rarely. The nest is a strong, coarse and very bulky structure, and is composed chiefly of twigs and roots firmly interwoven. The lining does not differ materially from rubbish chosen for the parts of the nest, and the old birds' aim is evidently to secure as much strength as possible, regardless of appearance.

The nests found in close proximity to human habitation differ from those that may be constructed in more remote places, by having a larger variety of material, such as rags, twigs, stems of grasses and leaves, and in size it is almost equal to the Crow Blackbird's nest. Both birds labor very diligently together in its construction, which

they complete in from four to five days. On the day after nidification ends, oviposition commences: this covering a period of from four to six days, according to the number of eggs which is to constitute the setting, the usual complement being five; but never more than a single egg is deposited daily. In color they are greenish or brownish-gray, spotted with olive-brown, and measure about 1.15 in. in length by .85 of an inch in width.

Oviposition being completed, the arduous task of incubation next succeeds, and is the exclusive labor of the female for a period varying from seventeen to eighteen days. The male, during the whole time, becomes a very jealous husband and a most willing provider; often repairing to immense distances in search of articles of nourishment. While he is not thus engaged, he remains in close proximity to his home and loved one, guarding them from intrusion. His alertness and vigilance are truly remarkable, and woe be to any of the feathered creatures of the field or forest who is rash enough to venture into his domain. The songs of this species differ, and having such a variety of notes, it is very difficult to describe them. Some are low and very musical, and again he may be heard screaming at the top of his voice. Its powers of mimicry are great, as we have heard it mimic the cries of the *Buteo borealis*, *B. lineatus* and *Falco sparverius* with perfect accuracy.

Many of our older Ornithologists and others claim that the Blue Jay ranks next to *Corvus americanus* for the depredations they commit by sucking eggs and devouring the young of other birds, for Audubon, in his "Birds of America" says: "It robs every nest it can find, suck the eggs like the crow, or tears to pieces and devours the young birds. A friend once wounded a Grouse (*Bousa umbellus*) and marked the direction which it followed, but had had not proceeded two hundred yards when he heard something fluttering in the bushes, and found his bird belabored by two Blue Jays, who were picking out its eyes. The Thrush, the Mockingbird and many others, although inferior in strength, never allow him to approach their nest with impunity; and the Jay, to be even with them, creeps silently to it in their absence, and devours their eggs and young whenever he finds an opportunity. I have seen one go its rounds from one nest to another every day, and suck the newly-laid eggs of the different birds in the neighborhood, with as much regularity and composure as a physician would call on his patients."

The writer has never been fortunate enough to observe this species in the act of killing and devouring young birds ; but has on several occasions seen them stealing eggs from other birds' nests ; but notwithstanding all this they do a wonderful amount of good by destroying a great many insect, which I think certainly overbalances their egg stealing and bird killing propensities. As to the food of this species it is voluminous and various, being both vegetable and animal in character. Having made an examination of over sixty (60) stomachs, which were taken at different intervals since the spring of 1880, the contents has given sufficient evidence to warrant a verdict in favor of this species being of great value to farmers, and will show that the Blue Jay is not half so bad a fellow as many would suppose.

Among insects which seem to be eagerly devoured throughout the summer months are Tent Caterpillar (*Clisiocampa americana*), Forest Tent Caterpillar (*C. sylvatica*), Promethea Moths (*Callosamia promethea*), White-marked Tussock Moth (*Orgyia leucostigma*), Spring Cankerworm (*Anisopteryx vernata*), Autumn Cankerworm (*A. pometaria*), Lime-tree Winter Moth (*Hybernia titiaria*), Comma Butterfly (*Grapta comma*), Red-legged Grasshopper (*Caloptenus femur-rubrum*), Green Striped Grasshopper (*Chimarocephala viridifasciata*), May Beetle (*Lachnosterna fusca*), Earthworm (*Lumbricus terrestris*) and Red Ant (*Formica sanguinea*). The fruits of the following are also eaten : American Beech (*Fagus ferruginea*) Red Cedar (*Juniperus virginiana*), White Oak (*Quercus alba*) Scrub Pine (*Pinus inops*), and seeds of wheat, corn and blackberries.

In conclusion I will give a few words from the pen of Dr. Kirtland in regard to this species as an insect destroyer, and which appears in Dr. Brewer's "North America Birds." He says : "When he first settled upon his farm, he observed that every wild cherry and apple tree was well nigh denuded of its leaves by the larvæ of *Clisiocampa americana*. The evil was so widespread that all efforts to counteract it seemed utter hopelessness. At this crisis the Jays made their appearance and established colonies. The tent-caterpillars constituted a ready diet for their young, and were preyed upon so extensively that in two or three years afterwards, not a single individual was to be seen in the vicinity."

This alone certainly creates impressions in their favor, and should encourage us to stop all persecutions, and give them a most generous welcome.