

**SPECIES OF THE MONTH****PINYON JAY**

APRIL 2024



Kay Hawklee, President of Northern Arizona Audubon Society, has been participating in Pinyon Jay surveys for 4 years and took this photo on her survey route along Winona Ranch Road, east of Flagstaff, Coconino County, 12 October 2023.

Over the last 50 years, Pinyon Jay (*Gymnorhinus cyanocephalus*) numbers range-wide have declined by an estimated 80%. Today, the Pinyon Jay is in trouble possibly because of the loss of mixed-age and mixed-density mosaics in its pinyon-juniper habitat.

Since 2017, several federal, state, and nongovernmental organizations have been collaborating and formed a Working Group to learn more about the status of the Pinyon Jay in the western United States. This group is assessing habitats, causes of population declines, and the impact of habitat management on the species. The Arizona Game and Fish Department and partners have been conducting standardized Pinyon Jay surveys in Arizona since 2021. Over the course of 3 survey years (2021-2023) Pinyon Jays were detected at approximately 76% of the plots surveyed, indicating that the species is still common across pinyon-juniper woodlands in Arizona. In August 2023, the U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service announced a 12-month status review to determine if the Pinyon Jay is a threatened or endangered species based on the Endangered Species Act of 1973.

The Pinyon Jay is a pinyon-juniper obligate species that has evolved a codependent relationship with pinyon pine trees. These steel blue jays are superbly adapted to harvesting, transporting, and caching pine seeds, which they carry in an expandable esophagus that can hold up to 40 seeds. In years with good seed crops, individual birds cache tens of thousands of seeds in thousands of cache sites. An exceptional spatial memory allows them to return and find seeds cached many months earlier. In winter Pinyon Jays are almost entirely dependent on seeds they have cached the previous autumn. The jays play a vital role in maintaining pinyon-juniper habitat by dispersing seeds which then grow into trees from forgotten seed caches. Highly social, Pinyon Jays nest in loose colonies. They form large roving flocks, sometimes up to hundreds of birds.