



resource room

## Canada jays



## Oh, Canada jay!

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**The Canada jay (*Perisoreus canadensis*) (aka: Whisky jack, Grey/Gray jay, and Camp Robber) lives year-round in the boreal and subalpine coniferous forests of BC and right across Canada. The name “Whisky jack” is an anglicized version of *Wisakedjak*, a prankster in Cree lore.**

Canada jays are intelligent corvids like crows, ravens, and magpies. They are fluffier, smaller, and (some say) cuter than those corvid cousins, especially when they endearingly cock their heads from side to side. They are various shades of grey with a white face and neck. They have a small bill, short rounded wings, and a long tail.

When foraging, they may almost appear to fall down out of trees. Or they may silently swoop like a little owl. They can also be seen sailing down from the top of one tree to the lower part of another and then hopping in a spiral upward from branch to branch. They're often in small family groups or in the company of chickadees. They are seldom far from coniferous forests.

These omnivores eat insects, eggs, small mammals, amphibians, carrion, fungi, berries and seeds. They stash large quantities of food for their long winter survival by making *boluses*. Boluses are pieces of food mixed with sticky saliva and then stored in bark crevices, under tufts of lichen, or among conifer needles. (These look like gluey blobs if you ever find one.) Canada jays have an incredible memory to retrieve cached food months later. These caches allow the jays to live in a snowy environment and to begin nesting early - in February.

Canada jays are also attracted to human food. These friendly spirits are unusually tame for wilderness birds. They follow hikers into camp sites and picnic grounds, and hang around cross-country ski and snowshoe trails waiting for scraps. They're smart, brazen, inquisitive, and quick to take advantage of unattended snacks.

### Please note:

We really shouldn't feed wildlife our food. It can create dependence on us and over time they may become scrounging pests or problem wildlife. Their natural wild food sources are superior to our over-processed food anyhow.

Better to be still and watch these sweet birds. Binoculars are helpful, but often they will come quite close and put on a show!

The Canada jays are often heard before seen. They have a number of calls, whistles, and imitations in their repertoire. My favorite calls are their soft warbling chatter and "whee-oo" whispered whistle songs. They can also give a soft owl-like "who-who" or scolding "ack ack ack" or low "tchuk".



Nesting Canada jays put twigs and bark in their coniferous tree cavity nests before lining them with feathers and fur. Two to five light-green, speckled eggs are laid in March. Their young are ready to leave the nest in early May, when snow is melting and many migratory birds are just arriving. A pair mates for life and will defend a permanent territory year-round.

### My unusual Canada jay encounter:

Once, when I was at my favourite cross-country ski cabin, I spotted big ugly gobs on nearby trees. I thought some skiers must have been having a spitting contest! Ugh! I couldn't believe my eyes, I'd always thought of the cross-country ski crowd as civilized.

Later, as I was sitting on the deck, a sweet little Canada jay swooped down, gobbled up a dropped piece of muffin, and immediately flew off to a nearby tree where it glued a mix of muffin and sticky saliva against the trunk. Another jay soon came and did the same thing in another tree. Ah ha! The mystery was solved!

Can you think of a wildlife mystery you've encountered? Were you able to solve it?