

Title: Dr. Steller's Jay

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Abstract

This presentation tells the story of Georg Wilhelm Steller and the natural history of the Steller's Jay which was named for him after he described a specimen from coastal Alaska in 1741. This is perhaps the most commonly encountered vertebrate in the Sierra, yet it is little appreciated. The visibility of this species can be a hook for leading into other lessons in wildlife, habitat, history, geography, food webs and not taking things for granted. Knowing more of the Steller's Jay story may help interpreters convey some of the species charm and mystery, and therefore improve stewardship of habitats for jays and other things.

Keywords

jay, Alaska, Russia, Germany, biologist, corvid, sea cow, sea lion, shipwreck, Cyanocitta stelleri, Vitus Bering, Peter the Great, subspecies, structural blue, eider, sea eagle, Steller, North Pacific, Alaska Natives, exploration, discovery

Introduction

Almost every visitor to western mountains will encounter at least one noisy, colorful Steller's Jay at some point. Birders ignore them, many people disdain them. However this common species has some hidden attributes that make it worthy of the attention of visitors, mountain residents and naturalists. Pay attention to Steller's Jays; they have something to tell you.

Body

German biologist Georg Wilhelm Steller was part of Russia's exploration of its eastern shore and sailed with Captain Vitus Bering in 1741-42. Bering set out with two ships, which became separated in a storm after a few weeks. Bering and Steller's ship twice made brief landfalls in Alaska then was wrecked on a Russian island for about 9 months. Bering perished on the island, most of the crew barely survived but was able to rebuild the ship in the summertime and sail to their home port. This was a remarkable voyage of discovery that ranks Bering and Steller with Shackleton and Darwin.

Steller was a passionate naturalist, elated to have field time in a vast part of the world that was entirely unknown to Europeans. He collected numerous biological specimens and made extensive notes on his natural and cultural history findings in Siberia, at sea, on two Alaskan islands and on the Russian island. Steller learned how to treat scurvy from the native Siberians and was the first westerner to do so. Steller was also the first to hypothesize that the Americas were initially populated by people who came from northeastern Asia. He was a very capable mineralogist and botanist, but is best known for having wildlife named for him. Besides the jay, his notes were used to name the Steller's Eider, Steller's Sea Cow, Steller's Sea Lion and the world's largest eagle, the Steller's Sea Eagle.

He accomplished a great deal in a short time; Steller perished from an illness while returning from Siberia at the age of only 37.

The expedition's critical first landing was at what's now called Kayak Island, near Cordova. They named Mt. St. Elias. Steller had only a few hours ashore while sailors collected fresh water. Here he collected a species of jay he hadn't seen before. He knew it:

.wasn't found in Siberia

.looked similar to a Blue Jay portrait he'd seen in a book in the library at St. Petersburg

.was effectively a biotic ambassador confirming that they'd landed in the New World; this biological discovery was a key moment for Steller and the expedition

Steller's Jays are members of the Corvidae family, along with other jays, crows, ravens, magpies and Clark's nutcrackers. Corvids are like the primates of the bird world: social, smart, adaptable, opportunists.

Steller's Jays are omnivores, they mate for life; they're predators, scavengers and prey. No less than 16 subspecies of Steller's Jay are recognized; California has two subspecies somewhat geographically isolated in the Coast Range and in the Sierra/Cascades. They don't migrate (except altitudinally) but are found over a remarkable stretch of latitude: from Alaska to Nicaragua. This is the provincial bird of British Columbia. Their crest is the longest of any North American bird. They cache some food for later retrieval. The sexes are virtually identical to us but not to other jays, who find it obvious.

Like most other blue birds, their feathers have 'structural blue' rather than pigment for color. As with the blue sky, the color we see is due to scattering, reflection and refraction. Hold a feather up to the light and all color vanishes.

Conclusion

Especially because they're so often seen, a good naturalist or interpreter should pay attention when you encounter this bird even if your program is focused on kelp, fire, a historic fort or desert tortoises. Visitors to parks and nature centers in jay habitat will easily relate to this bird's behavior, ecology, breeding, food storage, etc. In many habitats you're far more likely to have a chance to observe a jay than a wolf, condor, mountain lion, golden trout, eagle or other wildlife – you can use the jay to leverage interest in other elements of natural history and stewardship. If you don't have Steller's Jays where you work, find some other commonly ignored organism, research its name and its deeper stories and make use of its accessibility.

Also, we never know when a common thing will get into trouble. No one will ever see a Steller's Sea Cow. We will never see a grizzly in California again, and no American will ever see what was once the most common bird in our country, the passenger pigeon. Only forty years ago, mountain yellow-legged frogs were as common as pine trees in Yosemite- they may be extinct in another 10 years. It makes sense not to take too many things for granted. Steller's Jays, clean water, common plants, our friends and family – all deserve our attention and protection.

References

Ford, Corey. *Where the Sea Breaks its Back*. Boston: Little, Brown. 1966.