

A Blue Jay in Solano County

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On 19 December 2005 during the Benicia Christmas Bird Count (CBC), Margaret Barson and Barbara Barter saw a Blue Jay (*Cyanocitta cristata*) on the electrical wires in the Willotta Oaks subdivision between Rockville and Fairfield, Solano County. The bird was associated with Western Scrub-Jays (*Aphelocoma californica*), and was being harassed by them. It was also seen in the oak tree in front of the home of Wayne and Dorothy ("Dot") Little. Barson knew immediately how rare a sighting this was for the Benicia CBC, as well as for California in general. She later tried to find the bird again with her team captain, Fran Scarlett, but they were unsuccessful. Later at the CBC compilation, Barson did not announce seeing the jay when species were shouted out, but quietly told me afterward what she had seen. Since she had birded in the eastern United States, she was very familiar with the species.

The next day I went out to verify four species that had been reported on the CBC, one being the Blue Jay. On my first visit to the area, I found no Blue Jay. I continued to look for the other three rarities that had been reported and was successful with two of them: a Cattle Egret (*Bubulcus ibis*) and a Cassin's Vireo (*Vireo cassinii*). I decided to return to Willotta Oaks and try once more; once again, no Blue Jay. But it was later in the morning and by now some of the residents were awake. I stopped off at Linda Trieste's home because she had seed feeders, as well as hummingbird feeders. She did not know what a Blue Jay looked like, but acknowledge that she might have seen it when a field guide with its picture was shown her. I then visited with Wayne and Dot Little, the couple whose yard had the oak tree in which the jay had been seen on the count. Wayne said he had seen a "mountain jay" in his back yard and had been feeding peanuts to it for about two weeks. From his verbal description, I deduced he had indeed seen a Blue Jay, and when he was shown a picture of it in the field guide, he confirmed it. I exchanged phone numbers and asked him to call me if they saw it again and to try to get some photos of the bird.

It rained heavily for several weeks afterwards. On 4 January 2006, Wayne called me to report, "It's here!" Murray Berner, Uzelle Williams Fran Scarlett and I went to look for the bird the next morning. Sure enough the Blue Jay arrived for its peanuts. I discussed with the Littles the prospect of entertaining the hundreds of people that would probably come to look for this bird. Dot was fine with just announcing they had the bird at their address. Wayne was a bit more cautious. We compromised. We asked the owners of the nearby Iwama Market and the owner of the adjacent orchard

to allow birders to park at their lot so that Willota Drive would not be crowded with parked cars. On 6 January, the Blue Jay was announced to the birding community. The rest, as they say, is history. Many birders purchased kiwis at Iwama Market and got to see the bird (see front cover) until it was last seen on 25 March.

The Blue Jay is a rarely seen visitor to California. The first record for the state was a bird collected in Chico, Butte County, by Thomas L. Rodgers on 24 April 1950 (McCaskie 1970). This remained the only Central Valley record of the species for nearly 55 years, until discovery of the Solano County bird. By 1980 the California Bird Records Committee (CBRC) had accepted 8 records of the Blue Jay for California. Five of these birds were found along the coast from Del Norte to Marin counties during the winter of 1977-78 and in the fall of 1978, following a period of a few years in the mid-1970s during which the species expanded its range in the Pacific Northwest (Roberson 1980). Records have accumulated at a much slower pace since then (three, bringing the total number accepted by the California Bird Records Committee for the state to eleven), and have continued to follow a pattern of winter occurrence along the northern California coast (seven of the eleven records; Rottenborn and Morlan 2000).

LITERATURE CITED

McCaskie, G. 1970. The Blue Jay in California. *Calif. Birds* 1:81-83.

Roberson, D. 1980. *Rare birds of the West Coast*. Woodstock Publications, Pacific Grove, CA.

Rottenborn, S. C., and J. Morlan. 2000. Report of the California Bird Records Committee: 1997 records. *Western Birds* 31:1-37.