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## Birds of Barrington:

### BLUE JAY

On a bird walk at Beverly Lake in Spring Creek Forest Preserve last fall, our group stood for several minutes in the parking lot, transfixed by a river of Blue Jays passing overhead. They just kept coming and coming and we continued to see bands of them in flight throughout the walk.

September is a month for Blue Jays. It's not that they are absent other months of the year in the Barrington area; many are year-round residents. But September activates their movement and noise. Almost any time I step outside these days, I hear the sharp "Jay! Jay! Jay!" cry of the species and look up to see a medium-to-largish bird silhouette in straight, unwavering flight. The streams of jays we observed at Beverly Lake most likely were that year's youngsters heading farther south for the winter, as they often do, while mature birds remain behind.

The Blue Jay (*Cyanocitta cristata*) belongs to a large family. There are over 35 species of jays in the Western Hemisphere, but only one can be found in our region. With its loud calls and conspicuous blue, black, and white plumage (males and females look identical), it becomes familiar


even to youngsters not paying much attention to birds.

Visually the jay is striking—not just for the color of its feathers, but also for its prominent crest, its erect bearing, and no-nonsense behavior. Never shy or understated, Blue Jays burst from tree tops in raucous bands, giving the impression that they know exactly where they're headed and why.

The birds are well known for their marauding ways. John James Audubon's painting of Blue Jays depicts a trio of them piercing songbird eggs and devouring the contents. But while jays occasionally do raid the nests of other birds, they fearlessly defend their own nests against potential predators such as squirrels and cats. When their loud cries become shrieks, they likely are "mobbing" a hawk or owl that has entered the neighborhood. A few weeks ago, I watched two jays persistently fly at a perched Merlin, a type of falcon migrating through, until the Merlin finally left to escape their pestering.

Jays typically cry their familiar "Jay! Jay!" but they have an impressive repertoire of other vocalizations, many very un-jaylike. In the spring

they utter a strange "Toolool!" as they bob up and down on branches. They can make sounds like a clanky ratchet, a soft whir, and a screeching red-tailed hawk. It's easy to be fooled by their noises this time of year.

While you can expect to see Blue Jays streaming overhead in coming weeks, you can also look forward to their company for the months ahead. They are especially fond of acorns and spend a lot of time in the tops of oaks these days, both eating the nuts and carrying them away to secret caches for winter. Jays will readily visit bird feeders, too. Their vivid colors and bold ways make them an avian neighbor to appreciate in all seasons. 

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Wendy Paulson is a teacher and naturalist who has lived in the Barrington area for over 40 years. She revived the Nature Lady program in District 220 schools, started and directed the

education program for Citizens for Conservation, and has led regular bird walks in Barrington and Chicago, as well as in New York City and Washington, D.C. She currently teaches the Birds in My Neighborhood, a program she helped start with Openlands in Chicago Public Schools.