

ORNITHOLOGY

The Canada Jay: the National Bird of Canada?

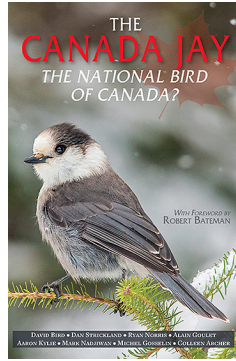
By David Bird, Dan Strickland, Ryan Norris, Alain Goulet, Aaron Kylie, Mark Nadjiwan, Michel Gosselin, and Colleen Archer. Foreword by Robert Bateman. 2022. Hancock House. 88 pages and 42 photos and illustrations, 14.95 CAD, Paper.

This slim, well-illustrated book makes the argument that it is high time Canada choose a national bird to go with its other national symbols, and thus join about half the other countries in the world that have official birds (as listed in Chapter 2: National Birds of the World).

In early 2015, *Canadian Geographic* launched the National Bird Project in an attempt to choose a species by the country's sesquicentennial in 2017. (One of the authors of *The Canada Jay*, Aaron Kylie, was Editor-in-Chief at the magazine when the project began [CBC 2017].) The project had three basic criteria: 1) the species had to be found in every province and territory, 2) it could not already be an official species anywhere, and 3) it had to be important to Indigenous peoples. The public could vote online from a list of 50 species, or they could nominate a species not on the list. It is important to note that the nominating committee did not commit to choosing the bird with the highest number of votes. The final round of voting and subsequent expert debate was limited to five species: Common Loon (*Gavia immer*), Snowy Owl (*Bubo scandiacus*), Canada Goose (*Branta canadensis*), Black-capped Chickadee (*Parus atricapillus*), and Canada Jay (*Perisoreus canadensis*).

In November 2016, after 50 000 votes and consultations with conservation, ornithological, and Indigenous groups, *Canadian Geographic* announced that its recommendation for a national bird was Canada (or Gray) Jay (*Perisoreus canadensis*). The next step was to have the bird officially recognized by the federal government; spoiler alert: it didn't happen, thus the impetus for this book. (Due to its status as a not-for-profit organization, *Canadian Geographic* was unable to directly lobby the government on Canada Jay's behalf [CBC 2017].)

In *The Canada Jay*, author Bird actually lists 18 reasons in favour of Canada Jay in Chapter 4 (Why the Canada Jay Should be Canada's National Bird). The species is considered a safe choice because it is not hunted or killed for being a nuisance anywhere, it is not endangered, and thus it will not disappear any



time soon. In Chapter 6 (Why the Very Neat Gray [Canada] Jay Beat Out the Very Common Loon), Bird explains why Canada Goose would not have been a good candidate: “its exploding numbers and unfortunate habit of coating lawns and golf courses with layers of poop makes it a non-starter for any political entity” (p. 39).

(Anyone interested in an alternative method for choosing official birds should check out “A Modest Proposal: Can eBird Help Choose Better State Birds?” [Smith and Devokaitis 2023] where the authors nominate species based on eBird data. Part 5 of the series is on Canada's official provincial species.)

In Chapter 7 (The Canada Jay—Our Country's Really Cool Ecological Wonder of Wonders), Strickland and Norris discuss jay ecology, focussing especially on how these birds survive Canada's sub-zero winters. The two authors are part of a study in Algonquin Provincial Park that has been underway for over 65 years. Co-author Archer (Chapter 3, A Whimsical Look at the Official Birds of Canada's Provinces and Territories) includes a few of Canada Jay's behavioural adaptations in a six-line ode of rhyming couplets:

These smart birds found throughout the land
Will come and eat right from your hand.
Sometimes called a campground robber,
They cover food with preserving slobber,
Then store as much as they can stash
And dine in winter on their cache. (p. 25)

In Chapter 8 (The Names of the Canada Jay), Strickland discusses the etymology of Canada Jay's common English name, colloquial English name (whiskyjack, a version of the Algonquian [Cree] word wiskicâhk), scientific name, official French name (Mésangeai du Canada), and colloquial French name (pic). While the authors lament that they were not able to publish the entire book in both of Canada's official languages, in Chapter 10 (Le mésangeai du Canada, une présence ancienne dans la culture Francophone) Goulet writes in French about the importance of the species to French-Canadian culture. Illustration captions throughout the book are also in English and French.

Besides contributing his drawing *For Seven Generations*, which features Canada Jay, Nadjiwan provides his Anishinabek view in Chapter 9 (An Indigenous View: the Canada Jay as Reconciliatory Agent and Environmental Emissary—a Most Worthy National Bird). He describes the book as “ultimately

intended to be more aspirational than informational” (p. 62), which leads to the concluding chapter (Ten Things We Canadians Can Do). Suggested actions fall roughly into two categories: natural history oriented and advocacy. In the first category, the authors tell readers to seek out and get to know Canada Jay. This might include introducing children to the species, maintaining bird feeders properly, and donating to environmental organizations. Suggested advocacy actions revolve around lobbying for the official designation: contact your Member of Parliament (MP), sign a petition on the website www.canadajay.org, convince any organization you belong to to write a letter of endorsement, and use local print and electronic media to promote Canada Jay as the national bird.

There is some wonderful detail in this book, but it would have benefited from a Notes or Bibliography section for readers who would like more information on this species. There is some repetition between chapters, as can happen when each is written by a different author. I noted one error, where the cartoon on p. 38 is attributed to Gilles LaMontagne rather than Patrick LaMontagne, although the creator is credited properly in the Acknowledgements. I only spotted

this because I am a big fan of LaMontagne, who is the editorial cartoonist for our local paper, the *Rocky Mountain Outlook*, and is syndicated in major newspapers across the country.

All of which raises the question ... why hasn't Canada Jay been designated Canada's national bird?

Literature Cited

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- CBC.** 2017. Canada isn't getting a national bird after all. Accessed 23 November 2023. <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/nova-scotia/national-bird-grey-jay-canada-150-1.4187987>.
- Smith, M., and M. Devokaitis.** 2023. Living bird spring 2023 table of contents—a modest proposal: can eBird help choose better state birds? [Parts 1–5]. *Living Bird Spring 2023*. Accessed 27 November 2023. <https://www.allaboutbirds.org/news/living-bird-spring-2023-table-of-contents/>.

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EDITOR'S COMMENT: If you'd like to learn more about Canada Jay's unique caching behaviour and see a photo of its "preserving slobber", see the article in this issue:

Hendricks, P., and S.S. Pagano. 2023. Canada Jay (*Perisoreus canadensis*) harvesting and caching fruits of Thin-leaved Snowberry (*Symphoricarpos albus*). *Canadian Field-Naturalist* 137(3): 243–248. <https://doi.org/10.22621/cfn.v137i3.3079>.