

## Jays making a “Steller” appearance at local feeders

by Todd Eskelin

On the first frosty morning this fall, I set up a bird feeder at my new house. I have established many new feeding stations over the years and in most cases met with limited success. It often takes a fair amount of time before the local birds find your feeder and make it part of their routine. The lifestyle of a job-seeking birdwatcher is not conducive to maintaining a long-term birdfeeder. I was hopeful that with a little vigilance and lots of black-oiled sunflower seeds, I could encourage a few chickadees to entertain me on cold winter days.

It took only one day before the first visitor made an appearance at my feeder. A robin-sized bird with a stunning black head glided down to my mound of sunflower seeds. Its back was colored in a deeper blue than the heart of an Alaskan glacier. Unmistakably, I had a Steller’s Jay boldly perched on my feeder like it owned the place. It kicked at the sunflower seeds and ate a few before disappearing into the dark spruce forest behind my house.

I had a sudden feeling of nostalgia thinking about this bird. It was the first bird I had ever identified in the little microcosm of my backyard. Likewise, it was the first bird ever described in Alaska by the European naturalist Georg Wilhelm Steller. Okay, I am reaching a little, but there was something special about this creature being the first species to visit my feeder. In July 1741, Georg Steller landed on Kayak Island in Prince William Sound as part of the crew of the Vitus Bering Expedition on the ship the St. Peter. They landed just long enough to collect fresh water and also long enough for Georg to take detailed notes on the first land bird ever classified in Alaska.

Unfortunately, the expedition met with considerable hardship. Their vessel ran aground on Bering Island during their return to Russia. They spent that winter on the island, with Vitus Bering and half of the crew dying of scurvy. Eventually they built another boat and sailed home the next spring. Georg Steller explored the Kamchatka Peninsula for 2 years and while returning to St. Petersburg, he was overcome by a fever and died. During his brief travels to our area of the world he made significant discoveries of new plants and animals including the bird bounding

around my back yard.

While there is evidence that Steller’s Jays have been in Alaska for quite some time, it is a relatively new resident to the western Kenai Peninsula. I can find no records of this species in the Kenai/Soldotna area until at least the 1970s. It appears that they are moving into our area from two directions. Starting in the early 1980s, there were many sightings of these birds along the Kenai River coming from Seward and the Prince William Sound direction. At approximately the same time, there were an increasing number of reports from the southern Kenai Peninsula moving northward.

While Steller’s Jays are most common throughout the coastal conifer forests of the Pacific Northwest, the southern end of its range extends as far south as northern Nicaragua. It is also interesting that as you move further south in the range, the completely black head changes to gray, brown, and many shades in-between. The throat and face also vary considerably across the range with some subspecies having completely white throats, and stripes above and below the eye. Despite all of the variation, there is no mistaking the striking crest and harsh raspy call of a Steller’s Jay.

Last year, a friend of mine asked me how to keep Steller’s Jays coming to his feeder. I told him the best food was whole unsalted peanuts in the shell. He told me recently that I had cost him a fortune over the past summer, as the Steller’s were eating or stashing every peanut he put out and he had to start rationing them. I now find myself in the same position. This single bird will willingly take every peanut I put out there. So if you have infrequent visits from Steller’s Jays and want to watch them more frequently, keep a bag of peanuts ready. The first time you rattle that bag and give them a handful, you will have them hooked. Similarly, having the opportunity to watch their antics as they bury those peanuts around the yard, you too will be hooked on this dark crested beauty: the Steller’s Jay.

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