

Clark's Nutcracker Identification



NUTCRACKERS BY SIGHT

Size: slightly bigger than a robin

Color: pale gray with black and white

Helpful ID characteristics:

- White patches at back of black wings
- Black stripe down the middle of white tail
- Long, black, sharp-tipped bill

NUTCRACKERS BY SOUND

Nutcrackers make a wide variety of sounds, but they make the following loud calls most often:

- “Kraaaaa” calls of varying lengths. These squalling sounds have been described as nasal, rolling, and gravelly.
- Shrill calls are clearer and higher in pitch.



NOT A NUTCRACKER



Common Clark's nutcracker look-alike is the gray jay:

- slightly smaller bird lacks contrasting black and white patches on its wings and tail
- has a shorter bill and a longer tail proportional to its body size
- calls are typically softer and more musical than calls of the Clark's nutcracker

Beware the lower-pitched calls of ravens and also the metallic cries of Steller's jays.

Clark's Nutcracker: Natural History



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The Common Corvid

On his journey west in 1805, explorer William Clark was slightly off when he described a new species of woodpecker; the nutcracker bearing his name is a member of the corvid or crow family. Jays also belong to this family.

Made For Each Other

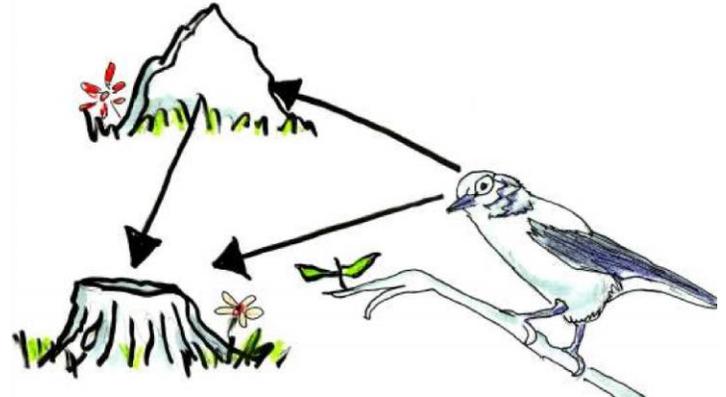
The whitebark pine and the Clark's nutcracker co-evolved together. Whitebark pine bears its cones near the tips of its upward-sweeping branches; these cones do not open on their own—they must be pried open by nutcrackers. Nutcrackers eat the whitebark seeds but also disperse them.

Clark's (nut) Snackers

Though nutcrackers eat a variety of foods and disperse the seeds of at least 10 different species of conifer in the western U.S., high-calorie whitebark pine nuts are especially important—in a recent study near Jackson Hole, nutcrackers didn't breed following years with low whitebark cone crops.

Fast Cache

According to one researcher, an individual nutcracker can cache—bury or hide—up to 98,000 conifer seeds in a season. Though the whitebark pine relies on the bird to forget a few of its seed-stashes, the nutcracker's excellent spatial memory allows it to relocate the majority of its hiding spots (sometimes even under a foot or more of snow). By manipulating landmarks in the cages of captive nutcrackers, researchers determined that nutcrackers remember distances and angles to nearby objects in order to triangulate the precise location of their food stores.



Tongue Tank

The Clark's nutcracker has a pouch beneath its tongue to temporarily store seeds. This thin-walled elastic sac allows the nutcracker to fly long distances with up to 150 whitebark pine seeds at a time.

Model Mates

Like several other species of bird, Clark's nutcrackers form monogamous pair bonds that last for life. Unlike the majority of other birds, however, male and female nutcrackers trade off sitting on the nest to incubate their eggs.

Old Teenagers

Clark's nutcrackers can live up to 17 years in the wild—an impressive age considering the demands of their high-elevation lifestyles.

