



PINYON JAY

A RAPIDLY DISAPPEARING SPECIES DESPERATELY IN NEED OF PROTECTION



The pinyon jay, a gregarious and iconic western bird, is plummeting in number and needs the protection of the Endangered Species Act (ESA) to dodge extinction.

Medium-size and pale blue except for the white bib on the throat, chin and upper breast, these crestless jays are social birds that fly, forage and nest together from central Oregon across to western South Dakota and central Montana down to southern New Mexico. They are an obligate species, which means their survival depends on a particular habitat, in this case healthy pinyon-juniper woodlands, where they feed on pinyon pine seeds—their primary food source—and juniper berries. Pinyon pines are mutually dependent on pinyon jays, relying on them to distribute their seeds across the landscape.

Conservation Status

The pinyon jay population has declined by 85% since the 1960s. Today they are widely recognized as species in trouble:

- Identified by Partners in Flight, a partnership of more than 150 organizations engaged in land bird conservation, as one of 39 “species on the brink” in the U.S. and Canada.
- Included on the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) Birds of Conservation Concern list.
- Listed as “vulnerable” on the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) Red List, a classification that suggests a “high risk of extinction in the medium-future if current population declines continue.”

Threats to Survival

Several factors are contributing to the ongoing decline of the pinyon jay:

- Loss of pinyon-juniper woodlands to drought and removal by thinning and chemical treatments to facilitate grazing, wildfire prevention and game management.
- Predation on eggs, nestlings and young. In Arizona and other areas, the mortality of eggs and nestlings ranges from 5% to 60%.
- Lack of regulations and monitoring. Although protected by the Migratory Bird Treaty Act, no legal protections are in place to protect the species and its habitat.



- Climate change and other environmental factors that lead to large-scale mortality of pinyon and juniper trees caused by drought, insects and disease.

What Defenders Is Doing

To reduce habitat loss and secure adequate regulatory protections for the pinyon jay, we are:

- Urging FWS to list the pinyon jay as endangered or threatened under the ESA. In April 2022, we formally petitioned the U.S. Secretary of the Interior to list and designate critical habitat for the species.
- Using science, education, litigation and research to bolster conservation of the pinyon jay and its habitat.

What You Can Do

Urge your federal, state and local agencies responsible for forest management to adhere to the management steps spelled out in the New Mexico Avian Conservation Partners publication, *Incorporating Bird Needs When Thinning Piñon-Juniper Woodlands*. These steps include scheduling forest thinning treatments to avoid disturbing nesting pinyon jays, keeping a buffer of undisturbed habitat around breeding colonies and leaving untouched patches of trees.

If you live in pinyon jay country:

- Put out a **feeder**. Pinyon jays often come to bird feeders for sunflower seeds, suet, cracked corn and peanuts.
- Participate in a **community science** project to help us learn more about pinyon jays.



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The biggest threat to pinyon jays throughout their range is the loss of their pinyon-juniper habitat.

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