

## A WESTERN SCRUB-JAY PREYING ON DEER MICE

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Scrub-jays of the genus *Aphelocoma* are known to be omnivorous and opportunistic in their feeding habits (Bent 1946). Stomach-content analyses of Florida Scrub-Jays (*A. coerulescens*) have shown that they feed predominantly on vegetable matter but that they also take large quantities of insects as well as frogs and lizards (Sprunt 1946). *Aphelocoma* spp. are also well known for raiding nests of other birds (Bent 1946, Haemig 1988). Although there are reports of Western Scrub-Jays (*A. californica*) preying on starlings and swallows (Ehrlich and McLaughlin 1988), as well as reports of Florida Scrub-Jays killing mockingbirds (Curry 1990), there have apparently been no previously reported field observations of their taking mammals.

On the morning of 25 April 2002, I was conducting small mammal mark-recapture work in piñon-juniper (*Pinus edulis-Juniperus monosperma*) woodland in the western foothills of the Sandia Mountains of central New Mexico (35° 17' N, 106° 28' W, 1890 m). I had captured two mice (*Peromyscus*) in succession on my trapline and had settled under a mixed clump of trees to record data on these animals.

At 08:15 I released the first, a 21-g adult male Piñon Mouse (*P. truei*), and started to process the second. At that point a commotion attracted my attention. Approximately 10 m away under a short (2 m) juniper, a Western Scrub-Jay was attempting to capture the just-released mouse, chasing him in, around, and through the scrubby low-lying branches. The jay alternated pecking at the mouse and flipping it a few inches into the air as the mouse bit at his assailant. The struggle lasted for approximately two minutes until the jay finally killed the mouse. The jay then flew off with its prey and landed behind a clump of juniper 20 m away.

As I circled around the trees to get a closer look the jay left the mouse and flew to the top of a tall piñon tree (~5 m), which was the highest vantage point in the immediate area. After I approached a few steps closer to the spot where it had dropped the prey, the jay retrieved the dead mouse and flew behind another clump of trees 10 m farther away. It immediately dropped the mouse and returned to its perch atop the piñon. For approximately five minutes I searched for the *Peromyscus* and then observed the jay for another few minutes while it remained on its perch watching me intently.

I then returned to process the remaining White-footed Mouse (*P. leucopus*), also an adult male (18 g.). Although I moved farther behind another clump of trees to block my release of the mouse from the view of the scrub-jay, it immediately swooped down again as I released the mouse. This time the struggle took place approximately 1 m from me within a large clump of piñon and juniper. As in the first incident, the jay weaved in and around the trees but took less than a minute to complete the capture. The jay then flew straight away, and I lost sight of the bird.

Scrub-jays are common in the area and at times can be a great nuisance to small-mammal trapping. They frequently steal bait and bedding from Sherman live-traps as well as generally disturb them and trip them closed. However bold they may be when our backs are turned, the jays are typically reticent about approaching or allowing humans to approach closer than approximately 5 m.

Although it might seem abnormal behavior—the diurnal scrub-jay preying on nocturnal *Peromyscus*—evidence from stomach analyses indicates that these jays do occasionally prey on small mammals. In northern California, Beal (1910) found that the total stomach contents consisted of 27% animal matter and 73% vegetable matter. In spring the proportion of animal matter was 70% of the diet. The animal matter

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primarily consisted of beetles, caterpillars, and bird eggs. Of 326 stomachs analyzed, however, 11 contained bones of rodents and shrews.

This incident occurred in the spring of a particularly dry year for the area, in which precipitation was less than 50% of normal. There was little in the way of spring annuals or arthropods available (Ryan Swarz pers. comm.). The appearance of rodents easily available as prey items during a lean spring may have been too good an opportunity for the scrub-jay to resist, even with me so close.

I thank William L. Gannon and Robert W. Dickerman for reviewing early drafts of this manuscript. Financial support was provided by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention under cooperative agreement number US3/CCU613416-07 and IPA number 01IPA12004.

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*Accepted 18 November 2002*