

friendly fliers



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Discover why these four birds top our list when it comes to congeniality.

By David Shaw, Fairbanks, Alaska

As a scientist, I dislike anthropomorphizing the birds I study. Most of the time I can easily argue away their near-human behavior. But there are a few species that, for their intelligence, appealing behavior and association with humans, are just exceedingly likable. Lacking a good scientific term for this group of birds, I think I'll just call them friendly.

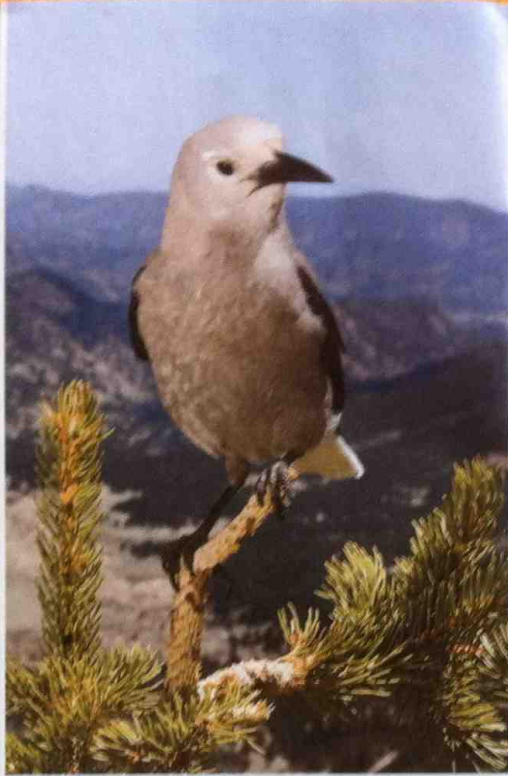
Cheery Chickadees

The first group of friendly species is the chickadees. They frequent our yards and feeders so often that they would be impossible not to include. Seven species of chickadees are found in North America. One, the gray-headed chickadee, occurs only in Alaska, and even there requires so much searching that most Alaskan birders, including me, have never seen one.

Five species are regional. Carolina chickadees occur in the Southeastern United States. Boreal chickadees are limited to the boreal forest that covers the northern portion of the continent. Mountain chickadees are found in the Rocky Mountains, Mexican chickadees occur only in the far southern tip of Arizona and New Mexico, and chestnut-backed chickadees are found in the Northwest. Only black-capped chickadees occur across the whole of North America.

All the chickadee species share some traits, the most notable being their bold and inquisitive nature. They do not seem to fear, well, anything. I've watched a chickadee on a cold winter day fly down and land atop my ski pole as I paused along the trail. That bird eyed me with some curiosity before letting loose a scolding *Chick-a-dee-dee!* and returning to the branches above.

I've watched chickadees dive-bomb and harass a goshawk that outweighed them more than a hundred times. When I've captured black-capped chickadees during research projects, they—unlike every other of the hundreds of species I've handled—will fight every step of the way.



They will peck at the hands of the bander as the measurements are taken, bite as hard as they can at the sensitive spots between fingers, and often, before flying off after release, will pause to administer one more painful peck.

A friend who helped teach me about birds many years back told me, "If chickadees were as big as jays, nobody would go into the woods." He may well be right. Yet I consider them friendly. It seems counterintuitive, but to me it's their boldness and courage—traits I find admirable in humans—that make them seem so friendly.

Neighborly Nuthatches

Nuthatches are just too endearing not to be included in this group of friendly birds. North America has four species: the brown-headed nuthatch of the Southeastern U.S., the pygmy nuthatch of the pine forests of the mountain West, the red-breasted nuthatch of the boreal forest and the higher elevations of the western part of the country, and the white-breasted nuthatch, which is distributed across most of the Lower 48.

As a group, they are as bold as chickadees, but without

SOCIAL BIRDS. Though many birds display humanlike behavior at times, birds such as the white-breasted nuthatch (above, left), the Clark's nutcracker (above) and the white-crowned sparrow (above, right) are especially well-known for their bold, friendly antics that make them so endearing to humans.

the attitude, often flying right up to a feeder even as it's being loaded with seeds or peanut butter. They will perch vertically, upside down, on a tree trunk and wait patiently for their chance at the treat. In fact, it is this trait—their ability to perch head down on a vertical surface—that distinguishes them from all other species of birds. When not visiting feeders, they derive a good portion of their food from the insects hiding beneath the scales of tree bark. Their unique ability to scale up and down the trunk of a tree is a perfect strategy for such a search.

Nutty Nutcrackers

While several species of corvids—the family that includes crows, ravens and jays—are friendly, one group has earned the nickname of camp robber. Clark's nutcrackers are the



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quintessential avian thieves. If you've picnicked or camped in the high conifer forests of the Rockies, you've probably encountered a Clark's nutcracker. They appear almost magically from the forest, somehow knowing where there's food to be found.

They are large gray jays with black wings, white outer tail feathers and intelligent dark eyes. Their main food source, apart from the opportunistic theft from camper's backpacks, is the seeds of pines. In fact, they are so closely tied to pines that several species of trees, including the white-bark pine and the southwestern white pine, depend almost entirely on the Clark's nutcracker for seed dispersal.

They have an uncanny memory that can store the locations of thousands of seeds, which they cache as the pinecones ripen. That memory and the ability to acquire food are attributes I'd choose in any friend.

Splendid Sparrows

The last species, the white-crowned sparrow, I include for personal reasons. In Alaska, they are among the most abundant songbirds during the spring and summer. I

conduct a lot of field research, and whether I'm searching for nests in the boreal forest or surveying birds in the high alpine ridgetops, I am rarely out of earshot of a singing white-crowned sparrow. I've had them sing from the top of my tent as I camped in the tundra, and had freshly fledged juveniles land on my boot while I rested during a hike. It must be their constant presence in my life that strikes me as friendly.

These species, more than many others, have chosen to associate with humans. They seem to like us. And, for me, that feeling is mutual. Their antics, courage and intelligence are striking, memorable and entertaining. And, like good friends, they are always around when I need them.



Web Plus: Blue jays are among the friendliest—and most controversial—birds around. Go to the Plus page of our website to learn about these fliers and get tips for attracting and controlling them.