

Breeding Attempts of the Blue Jay

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The Blue Jay *Cyanocitta cristata* is a well-known bird in America and I guess almost every reader of this magazine has seen this bird alive. In Europe, however, it is almost completely unknown and the millions of people looking at Walt Disney's Snow White (and other films) are unaware that the nice blue birds flying around in this film are in fact Blue Jays.

As far as I'm aware only three collections are keeping the Blue Jay at the moment in Europe. There is a pair at the well-known Birdpark of Walsrode, another pair at the birdpark of Metelen (both Germany) and a third pair at the Parc Paradisio in Belgium.

At the end of 1994 the Parc Paradisio received a completely legal shipment of five Blue Jays from Florida where they had lived in a bird sanctuary after they had been brought there by people who had found them injured in nature. Because the sanctuary has only limited room and a release in the wild was impossible because of the sort of injuries, it was decided to send a small group of the Blue Jays to Belgium.

In Belgium they were first placed in quarantine and after they proved to be parasite- and disease-free, we placed them in an indoor aviary for protection from the cold outside.

Shortly thereafter, two birds from the Birdpark of Metelen joined the five birds to make a free-pairing bond possible. After this didn't work, the birds were sexed by laparoscopy and found to be four males and three females. One pair was sent back to Metelen and the other five were released in spring into a very large and well-planted outdoor enclosure which was connected with a smaller indoor aviary. They shared this enclosure with a pair of Grayson's Pigeons and a pair of Ocellated Turkeys.

Although some nestbuilding behav-

ior was observed in the summer of 1995, no breeding attempt was made.

For reasons unknown (maybe old age?) two birds (one male, one female) died during the year and the three remaining birds were placed in the indoor enclosure once again in November.

Then Birdpark Walsrode asked us if we could give them a male Blue Jay for their single female and, because we had a male surplus, we sent one to them.


In the spring of 1996 our remaining pair were again placed in the outdoor aviary. Shortly after we released them, we regularly saw the jays flying with small twigs, hay, and feathers through the aviary and onto a small wire-mesh platform (which we had placed in a pine-tree) where they built a cup-shaped nest.

During the middle May the first egg was laid followed the next three days by three further eggs. At the beginning of the incubation period the weather was very good but a week later it started to rain and heavy storms gave us little hope of success. Even so, after about 18 days I found one living chick in the nest and the next day two more chicks had hatched. The fourth egg was found a day later broken on the bottom of the aviary.

At first the three chicks did well but

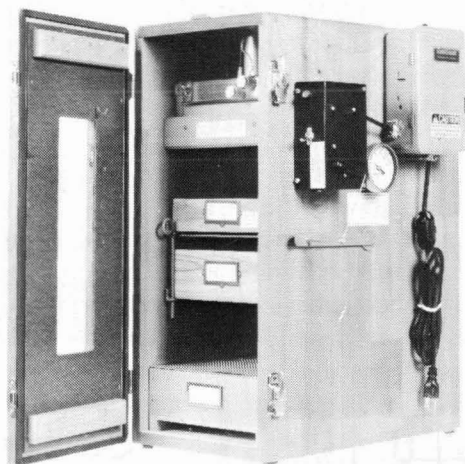
then, within two days, two chicks were found dead — also at the bottom of the aviary, I guess due to the bad weather conditions. The remaining chick did very well for the next seven days and then I made the mistake of taking off a week. Another keeper looked after the jays and after my short holiday the first thing I did was to inspect the jay nest. I found an almost fully grown jay chick — dead. You can imagine my disappointment.

A month later the Blue Jays started to rebuild their old nest and at the end of July four eggs were in the nest. Now the weather was much better and we had high hopes we would succeed this time. After about 17 days one chick hatched but again I took off for a few days and on my return again all I found was a dead chick. No further breeding attempts were made but, hopefully, next year the Blue Jays will do better.

From the Birdpark of Metelen I got word that they successfully raised three Blue Jays — because, perhaps, they took them out of the nest at one week old for hand raising. Although the Blue Jay population in European aviaries is very small, two pairs have proven to want to breed and with at least three chicks raised successfully, the population increased by 50% in 1996 which gives hope for the future. 

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