



walking toward home, hoping to take the Blue Jay indoors and figure out just what was wrong with him. On the way home, he repeatedly flew off into the woods and then back onto my shoulder, but I felt sure that he would fly away when I attempted to walk into the house with him. Amazingly, as I cautiously entered the house, the friendly bird stayed put, looking more curious than afraid. Once inside, I took him into a small room and offered him my hand. He stepped right up with a look that seemed to say, "What's up Doc?" He

BJ prepares to take off with another stolen treasure.

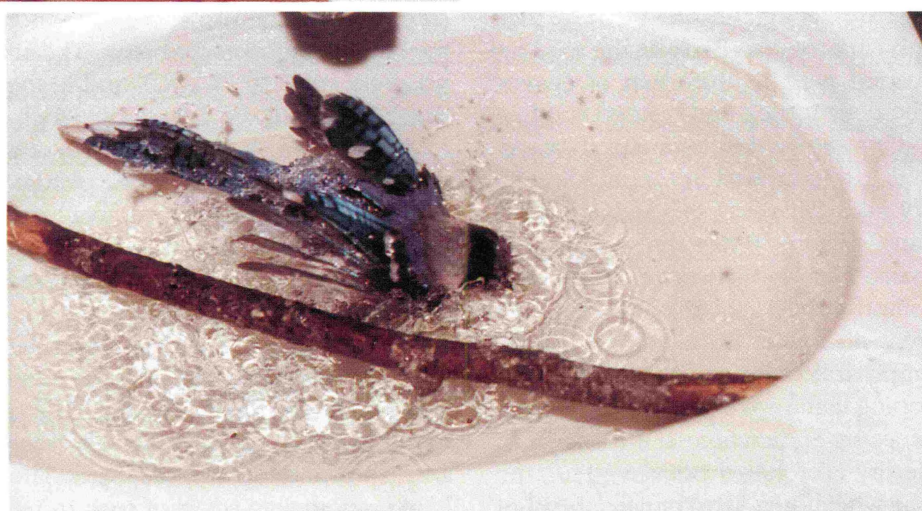
A Blue Jay Summer

by Carolyn Swicegood
Hollywood, Florida

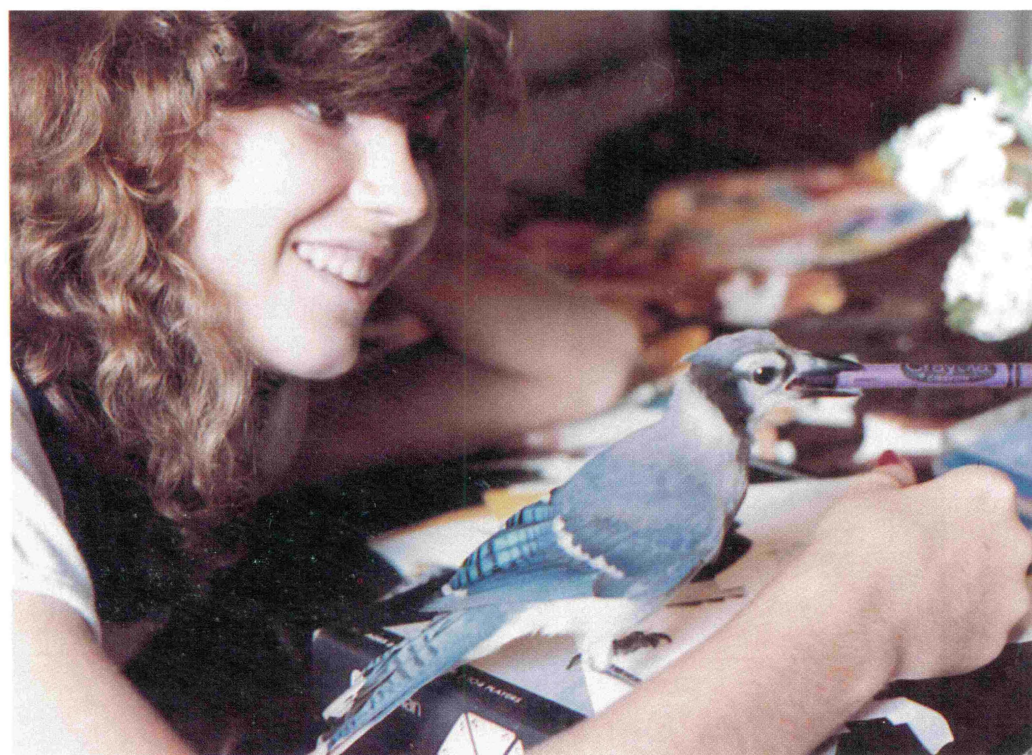
Have you ever dreamed of the "Bluebird of Happiness" landing on your shoulder? It *can* happen, and luckily, it *did* happen to me.

One bright and breezy early summer afternoon in the Blue Ridge Mountains of North Carolina, my mother, my five-year-old daughter, and I were walking along a quiet, winding road near our summer home in the mountain woodlands. Suddenly a young bird with cornflower blue feathers and a bright blue crest flew from the surrounding woods and landed confidently on my shoulder. It was a beautiful young Blue Jay with the beadiest, shiniest black eyes I had ever seen. He was completely fearless and after an inquisitive look into my eyes, peeked into my mouth which was now open wide in amazement at what had just transpired.

Thinking that this was a wild bird so disoriented that it had lost its natural fear of humans, we turned and started



BJ's delight: an inch of clear water in the basin and a perching stick.



Angie Swicegood's coloring project went well until BJ swiped the purple crayon.

then allowed me to examine him from stem to stern as I became more and more curious about this seemingly healthy "wild" bird who had no fear of humans; indeed, he seemed to like us.

While we worried that any minute he would start to show signs of illness, he flew around exploring every nook and cranny of his newly-found playhouse – a chalet-style house with ceilings so high that even a resident of the sky felt right at home. He immediately took inventory of all things bright and shiny and he wasted no time laying claim to his many new treasures.

The rules of his game were simple – whatever he could carry in his beak was *his*. While we tried to tempt him with food and water, he busily gathered all the bright coins, marbles, and other objects that caught his eye. It seemed that the objective of his earlier search of the house had been not only to find hidden treasures, but to search for places to stash the loot. It was open season on any and all good hiding places, such as light fixtures, book shelves, and cabinet tops. What a busy bird he was. Blue Jays in the wild hide and bury seeds and acorns for leaner times to come, planting many trees in the process. At least our blue feathered friend's instincts were very much intact.

After all his hard work, we knew that our guest must be hungry, and a quick search of the *Nature Encyclopedia* told us that this busy bundle of blue feathers needed bugs. The natural food source of Blue Jays is acorns and other vegetable matter but they also relish protein-providing insects.

When darkness fell, all the deck lights were switched on, and no poor Katydid that was drawn to the bright lights escaped the busy hands of two excited young girls intent on catching dinner for their new friend, "BJ," as he now had been dubbed. He was a happy feathered camper as he eagerly gulped down the winged and wiggly insects caught lovingly just for him. He then threw back his head over and over as he took down many a beakful of pure, cool mountain water, (perhaps to chase the buggy taste of those Katydids). After a few seeds – we were unforgivably out of acorns – and a peanut for dessert, he started nodding off so we set off on a tour of the house

trying to think like Blue Jays in search of a suitable roosting site.

BJ chose the highest available perch – a shower curtain rod in a quiet guest bath. He was clearly fascinated by the sixties-style psychedelic looking wallpaper. While he slept, we pondered the mysteries of our most exotic houseguest ever. We collected our resources and set about to learn more about "Blue Jay ways."

We learned that Eastern Blue Jays generally are about 13 inches long with a wingspan over a foot wide; that they are members of the Corvidae family which includes 40 or so different crows, as well as magpies, jackdaws, rooks, and nutcrackers; and that Corvids are considered to be extremely intelligent birds with the Blue Jay members of the family having mischievous personalities as well as a raucous "Jay! Jay!" call. Recently, when I read new research on the Corvids suggesting that they possess powers of abstract reasoning, creativity, memory, and insight that put them on a par with many mammals, including primates, I was not at all surprised after having observed our own resident Blue Jay.

Now I must point out that a Blue Jay waking up in a new house is about a hundred times more excited than you and I were upon awakening on our first morning of summer camp. There were new people and new places to see, and so much to do. There is no such word as "boredom" in Jaybird speak. Every object in BJ's view was a toy just waiting to be activated by the antics conjured up in his hyperactive imagination.

The light string in the top of a closet caught his eye and in a blurring flash of blue, he was Tarzan swinging through the jungle of closet "junque" on his makeshift vine! A jewelry box was an unbelievable find for BJ – a treasure trove of unimaginable value and he didn't even need a treasure map. He was instantly transformed into "Bluebeard, pirate on a mission!" Finder's keepers! Grab all the gold and precious jewels that a beak can carry and it's every bird for himself! Yippee!

BJ had already struck it rich in his new home. We were awed by the sheer energy with which he pursued his many adventures. His intense curiosity was a wondrous and endless

thing. Absolutely nothing escaped his notice!

After a few fun days indoors, it became obvious that BJ was a happy and healthy bird so we reluctantly set him free, watching him leave us from our upper deck in the tree tops. He flew off into the woods and we wistfully waved good-bye to our much-loved feathered friend.

"Huh? Good-bye? You think I'm leaving? No way!" he seemed to say as he banked a steep left and flew back into the house. Hurray! We obviously were blessed with an indoor/outdoor wildbird pet. Never have I enjoyed hiking in my beloved wild woods more than when accompanied by BJ, who excitedly flew from tree to tree, calling to me as we explored the forest wilderness together.

For the remainder of the summer, BJ came and went as he pleased. Often, we had only to call his name from the deck and suddenly, as if by magic, he would appear. Sometimes he was out of touch for hours, but he always

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returned for a bedtime snack and a safe haven in which to rest. Once he disappeared for three agonizingly long days and nights, and we fretted as we feared the worst. After searching for hours and inquiring at the clubhouse of the ski & golf resort where we live, we learned that a Blue Jay had been hanging around the kitchen of the golfer's Snack Shack, taking handouts from the chef – a new friend.

On the third afternoon of his unbearably long absence, BJ suddenly reappeared on the front deck, flew into our house, made himself at home and resumed sleeping indoors at night. Maybe our accommodations were not so bad after all. It was a happy reunion for all.

During the summer that we were blessed with BJ's presence, my daughters never once complained of nothing to do. With the feathered wonder around, there was an abundance of fun stuff for them to do because their bird friend immersed himself completely in their every activity – drawing, painting, clay sculpting, board games, hiking, and even playing in water. He stole

pencils, crayons, and paintbrushes with glee, flying hither and yon until he found a suitably inaccessible place to stash them before returning for more.

Years later we still find BJ's treasures hidden in remote corners of the house. He was quite the artist, "helping" with many drawings and paintings, with the complete approval of his adoring young friends. Otherwise, he could be found perching atop their heads, busily demonstrating his skills as an artistic stylist of hair and feathers.

A collection of an inch of water or more was the only excuse needed by BJ for a glorious bath. He adored bathing, which he did with the same gusto applied to everything that he did – wildly splashing and dunking his head and body under the water while twisting and turning till the last tiny feather was drenched beyond recognition. He had a particularly stern look with an equally harsh "CAW" that he reserved for anyone daring to bathe without him. After a bath, he enjoyed preening himself dry in a sunny window. His all-time favorite bathing method was in the bathtub with his five-year-old playmate who adoringly held him on his favorite bathing limb while he had a splashingly good time.

Our summer with BJ seemed the shortest in history. All too soon, it was time for the girls' schools to start in Florida and we worried about the effect on BJ of the engine noise of our small plane. I questioned my pilot husband about flight details and prepared a travel cage and thick cover for BJ, hoping for the best and wishing that we were driving instead of flying home.

The night before we were to leave our cool summer paradise, I put in the usual call to our local friend who takes care of our house when we, like most of our "snowbird" neighbors, fly south for the winter. As I was sharing with Fred my worry about the plane noise being too stressful for our Blue Jay friend, I was stunned into silence as he told me that the Stevens family who lived just around the mountain from us, a short distance from where BJ first found us, had lost their young Blue Jay at the beginning of the Summer. They had raised a Blue Jay baby after it fell from a nest near their winter home and had brought it with them to the moun-


tains at the beginning of summer. Amazed, I learned that they were from Miami, only 10 miles from where we live in the winter. They had even given their baby Blue Jay the same name that we had.

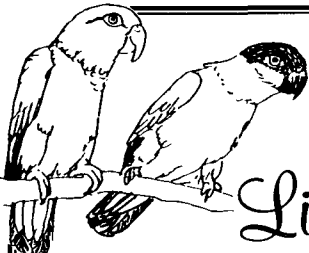
My heart sank at the thought of telling my daughters that "their BJ" had another home. I knew that they would be heartbroken at the thought of giving him up, but I also knew that his first family must have been heartbroken when BJ became our baby. I sadly thought about all their pain and worry as we enjoyed the bird that they had raised. After a tearful family discussion, we all agreed that there was only one *right* choice.

While sadly looking at my daughters' damp eyes and long faces, I dialed the phone with a painful lump in my own throat. Mrs. Stevens answered and was ecstatic to learn that her Blue Jay baby was alive and well. We immediately went for a visit with them and watched BJ as he left no doubt in our minds that he was right at home with this family. In fact, BJ's first human mother was about my height with dark hair much like mine. Perhaps he mistook me for her on that early summer Sunday that he found me walking near his summer home.

Our two families traded BJ tales and discussed which Florida home would be best for him. In spite of long sad looks from daughters Angie and Kristi, we all agreed that BJ would return to his roots in Miami where he would once again have free run of the woods adjoining the Stevens' home. Best of all, he could make the trip in their car. There were tearful farewells to our beloved BJ.....and later we learned that he took up with a flock of wild Blue Jays in his original territory, perhaps his long-lost relatives, and BJ returned to the wild before his second birthday.

It was a real success story for our not-so-wild but wonderful Blue Jay. There's an old saying that goes, "You can never possess the heart of a wild bird. It possesses you."

I suppose it is true that neither of his families ever really owned BJ but, little thief that he was, he stole all of our hearts and not one of us has ever forgotten BJ, our own little blue bird of happiness. 



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