



Spenser's first baby picture at left and his frequent "feed me" pose above.



Above, office help, assisting with the filing and stuffing of things.



Spenser has stolen another of the coins I keep handy in the van. This time it's a penny. You can see him holding it in his reflection in the side mirror.



Above, Spenser has just popped in an open window to say hello.



A good wing stretch in the sun



His favorite snack of goldfish crackers.



Spenser weighs 3.6 ounces!



Beautiful Spenser in the wild, free to do as he pleases!

Spenser Jay

Jennifer Saulsbury, Concord, CA

Although I've always enjoyed watching the antics of the Scrub Jays that populate the Bay Area of California, I never really *knew* one. All that changed on June 12, 2003... the day Spenser came into my life.

That morning began like most others. When I got to work, I took a handful of bird seed outside to put in the feeder (our office is operated out of a residential home, so we have a fenced backyard to enjoy). Bentley, the office cat, was creeping towards the lawn, so I figured I'd better investigate. The object of his interest was a dead baby bird, who looked like he'd passed away quite some time ago. I felt that twang of the heartstrings that most people feel when they see a dead baby animal, but he was definitely beyond anyone's help. Suddenly I realized that about three feet away was another baby bird, and this one was happily alive with bright black eyes. He had just enough blue feathers that I guessed he was a Scrub Jay, but I couldn't find a nest anywhere. He wasn't sitting directly under any trees and there was no sign of a nest (or his parents) anywhere nearby. So, I scooped him up before Bentley could, filled a shoe box with some cloths and paper towels, and suddenly had a new charge to care for.

I've hand-raised orphaned sparrows before and figured this couldn't be much different. Boy was I wrong about that! It wasn't any *harder* to raise a scrub jay, but the sparrows I've raised in the past did nothing to prepare me for the adventure of raising this little guy!

I arbitrarily decided he was a boy and named him Spenser, after the private investigator in Robert B. Parker's series of books. The Spenser character in the books is a strong, self-reliant, powerful, take-charge, able-to-take-care-of-himself type of guy and I was hoping some of that would rub off on my little bird.

Thanks to a wonderful and very understanding boss, Spenser was allowed to come to work with me, so he sat on my desk and demanded (and received) something to eat whenever he got hungry. He had *no* trouble adjusting from having a bird mother to having a human "mom." I must admit I probably didn't get nearly as much work done as usual: it was so much more fun to watch Spenser! His bright little eyes were always shining with curiosity, and when he wasn't asleep, he was keeping an eye on me.

Before too long, I started spreading a towel out on my desk and letting Spenser out several times a day. He was still a little unsteady, but seemed to enjoy having the chance to stretch his legs. One day, he was absolutely fascinated to discover his feet and couldn't stop staring at them with a

"what the heck are *those???*" look on his face.

He learned to fly about ten days after I found him, but could travel only very short distances and not with any degree of accuracy. He could usually make it from my desk to the top of my filing cabinet, where he liked to spend time with the Beanie Baby rooster and stuffed dodo bird that sit up there. But his favorite perches were either on my shoulder (usually chewing on my earrings), or on the back of my chair nestled up against my back.

His first bath was a huge success... he wasn't sure about it at first, but caught on quickly and then had a blast splashing around in the sink in the office bathroom!

By two weeks after I'd found him, he had made himself quite at home. He loved hopping around on my desk or on top of the files in the filing cabinet and I've found many stolen paper clips stuffed between the pages of our files.

I'll never forget the day he discovered his "big boy voice" – he seemed so surprised the first time he let out a huge SCREECH, then was so pleased with himself that he just wouldn't stop. That wasn't quite as endearing as his sweet baby Spenser cheeps, but you could tell that he was *so* proud of himself.

He was flying a little better at this point, so I made him an outside enclosure to get him used to the sights and sounds of the wild. That required some shuffling because Bentley is an indoor/outdoor office cat, but we were able to work around it and Bentley and Spenser were never outside at the same time. Spenser still wasn't eating much on his own, so even when he was in his enclosure outside, I went out to feed him every few hours (and truth be told, sneak in a little visit with him, too... he was so much fun). One day he swooped past me as I opened the door to his enclosure. He didn't go far, only up into one of the trees in the yard, but I thought maybe that was it and he was ready to be a wild bird – then another jay swooped in and attacked him, yikes! It may have been one of his parents; whoever it was sure was *not* happy to see him! I rescued Spenser and he happily went back into his enclosure after that, not quite ready to be a wild bird after all.

Each day was an adventure for Spenser, with new things to steal and hide and new nooks and crannies of the office to explore. A friend gave me some of her parrot's seed mix, and Spenser loved to find just the right spot to hide each one. I lost track of the number of times he tried to stuff a peanut into my ear or up my nose: he thought that was great fun!

One evening at home, we noticed a spider on our bedroom wall near the ceiling. Bryan picked up Spenser and held his hand up towards the spider. As soon as Spenser saw it, he flew right up and pecked it off the wall, then went right back to Bryan's hand. An "on demand" exterminator!

At home, I had set up an outside enclosure for him, too. On the one month anniversary of the day I found him,

he decided to surprise me when I was puffing him into his cage outside and flew to the top of a 40 foot tall cypress tree in our yard. He was flying well by then and spent the morning investigating the various trees in our backyard. I hadn't wanted him loose outside at home because there was already a family of very territorial jays nearby, but there wasn't much I could do about it once he was loose. Eventually the other jays noticed him and chased him a bit, but they tolerated him fairly well. After a morning of flying around, Spenser flew back into his outside cage and was ready for a long nap.

Shortly after that, we settled into a new routine. I still brought him to work with me every day, but I let him outside to fly around as soon as I got there. He happily flitted around the yard and occasionally even went a couple of houses up or down the street. I visited him outside on my breaks and at lunch, then when it was time to go home, I'd call for him and he'd dive in right away, ready to go back into his cage and home.

That "new routine" only lasted a few days then Spenser discovered my office window. It took only one day of him pecking holes in the window screen for me to take the screen off. Then he started landing on the sill outside, pecking pathetically at the window, fluttering his wings like he did when he was a baby, and making tiny pitiful cheep-

ing sounds until I cracked open the window for him, then he happily hopped in for some "desk time." After a while it seemed easier to just leave the window cracked open (he had me very well trained) so he could come and go whenever he felt like it. He thought that was great: he had the best of both worlds and could choose wherever he felt like spending time at any particular moment. Even my boss started leaving the window open for him in his office! We knew we wouldn't be able to leave the windows open for him forever, but I wanted him to have someplace he could go and feel safe while he was learning to be a wild bird – and he felt very safe in the office.

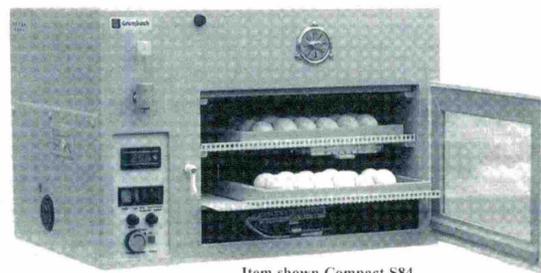
Then one day while my boss was on the phone, Spenser swooped in through his window, grabbed his favorite pen off his desk, and swooped right back out the window with it. Thief!

After the "pen incident" my boss decided that maybe it was time for Spenser's office privileges to be curtailed (good grief, he must have *really* liked that pen), so Spenser started spending more time outside and we started spending more time with the window blinds closed. Spenser still liked to fly through the office in the mornings, but soon got out of the habit of expecting to be let in through the windows.

He also started staying at work all the time, including

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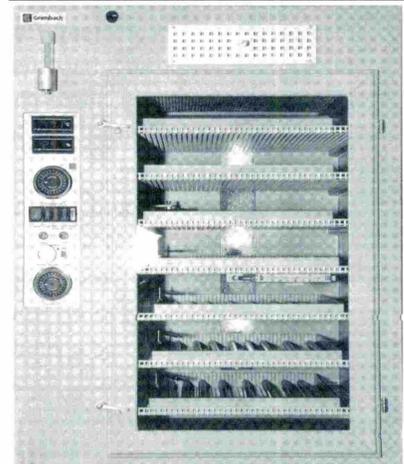
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overnight. I still left his cage outside for him and his food bowl full, but Spenser had made himself at home in the wild and I never saw him in his cage except when he was grabbing a quick bite to eat. He still visited all the time and loved it when I fed him treats, but he was doing well in the wild and was definitely becoming more independent. He also started spending time with some other young jays and the four of them could usually be seen zooming around together. Spenser still checked in with me at least several times a day, but he was enjoying his time with his new friends.

Then one morning, Spenser didn't come when I called him. He and his pals had disappeared. I know that's what was supposed to happen if I raised him right, but I was still heartbroken. I thought of him constantly and worried whether he was okay (it's probably good my husband and I don't have human kids – sending Spenser out to live on his own was traumatic enough). Since all four jays were gone, the best I could do is hope that he was with them and doing well. My summer with Spenser had been so much fun and I really missed the silly little lunatic, but I hoped he was okay and was enjoying his new life.

Then three weeks later, Spenser came back! I heard a jay squawking outside and went out to call for Spenser. I didn't expect to actually get a response, but thought I should at least try. And he flew right in. He landed in his favorite tree a few feet away from me and "chirruped" at me in the voice he used as a baby. We chatted with each other for a few minutes, then I put some cheddar goldfish (his favorite snack) on the ground a few feet from me. He grabbed one right away and then flew off. I was *so* relieved to see him and find out he was handling life in the wild like a champ.

After that day, Spenser started visiting a few times a week. If he heard (or chose to hear) me when I called for him, he'd come within a few feet from me, then I'd give him some goldfish and he'd be on his way. There was usually another jay that followed him around, but that one always stayed in the background.

As time went on, Spenser started inching closer and closer to me during our visits until the day he just snatched his cheddar goldfish out of my hand as I was putting them out for him. By February of this year, I could call for him, open my hand with a treat in it, and he would fly by and help himself to his snack.

In March, a change came over Spenser. He still wanted his now-daily snacks, but he was also very preoccupied – building a nest in the yard. He and his mate were hard at work, carrying twigs and loose bits of material into one of the trees. And what a thrill for me to have it happen right there in the same yard I found Spenser. They chose their tree carefully and built their nest high enough that it was hard to see, but it was still fun watching Spenser and his mate prepare for the arrival of their little ones.

By the end of April, I got my first glimpse of the



Contemplating theft of the van keys, and maybe the van? What will the cops say when they apprehend the teenage Spenser Jay Bird?

babies when they were big enough to venture out of the nest a bit. They were so fluffy and cute (in a baby bird kind of way). They weren't flying then, just starting to creep around on the branches in the trees. Spenser was looking pretty frazzled by then, frantically grabbing food and flying into the trees with it. He and his mate were both definitely working hard to keep up with their kids.

Near the end of June, the babies "flew the coop" permanently. And Spenser started getting much more social again. He now comes several times a day for peanuts (somewhere along the way, he lost interest in his beloved cheddar goldfish). He'll usually land on my hand, but will also occasionally perch on my shoulder or my head. His mate is still here, too, but will never be as comfortable around me as Spenser is.

I feel truly blessed to have Spenser as part of my life. He's taught me so much and has brought more joy into my life than I could ever say. I'm thrilled that he's a successful wild bird, but I'm also happy that he remembers me. I hope Spenser and I have many years of visits ahead of us. ❖