

# Breeding the Red-billed Blue Magpie at Tracy Aviary

by D. Grenville Roles, Curator  
Salt Lake City, Utah

Red-billed Blue Magpie, Red-billed Blue Pie or Occipital Blue Pie, this magnificent bird whose scientific name *Cissa erythrobryncha* means jay with a red bill (Jobling), is one of the most splendid members of the Corvid or crow family. Distributed in suitable woodland habitat over an enormous area of Asia, they range from the western Himalayas through to northeast China and the Indo-Chinese countries, south to Burma and Thailand (Goodwin).

Our adult hen was acquired from a dealer in 1984. By doing some checking, we were able to establish that she was at least 17 years old. Her mate who arrived with her at that time died four years later at a minimum age of 21. In 1988 we received a second male from a different source and paired him up, after a suitable quarantine period, to the widowed hen.

The original pair was additionally interesting because they were of two markedly different geographical races. The hen appears to correspond most closely with the nominate form described by Goodwin in his excellent monograph *Crows of the World* (published by the British Museum of Natural History 1976 and 1986). The nominate form is found in central and southern China and northern Indo-China. The original male was larger and coarser featured (which seems to be fairly typical) and much bluer, with pure white underparts and nape. He appeared to match the description for *C.e. occipitalis*, the westernmost form. The replacement male is clearly larger than the hen and equally matches the description of the nominate form.

When first acquired, the birds were accommodated in a large, heated building with access to an outside aviary. For their first winter here we would drive the birds inside at night and close down the pop hole. The birds would move like greased lightning and it was difficult and frustrating to get them both inside together. Late one afternoon the hen was trapped by



Photo courtesy of Tracy Aviary, Salt Lake City

Red-billed  
Blue Magpie

the keeper hastily shutting the door and, as a result, lost her lower mandible. That was seven years ago. As a result of that ghastly accident the pop hole was left permanently open and the birds allowed to choose for themselves either a heated area or not. Typically the birds would be outside at our approach and flee to the inside cage on our arrival at their building.

After three years the birds were transferred to our Himalayan Pheasantry as aerial occupants of the Swinhoe's Pheasant cage. A year or so after the move, the original male died and the replacement male was introduced six months later, in the spring of 1989.

I was a little nervous about the reaction of the new male to the disfigured female. Mostly because her exposed tongue may have looked like a tasty morsel to the male with possible nightmare consequences. As it was, I worried needlessly, for the hen seemed to fall head over heels in love and "flirted" shamelessly with the male, immediately spreading her tail and drooping her wings, "mewing" constantly while hopping excitedly around him. She seemed to want to show him every nook and cranny of his new home and as he followed her around like a dog on a leash for the next few hours he seemed not the least disconcerted by her unconventional appearance, actually offering her some food within ten minutes of their introduction.

A wire basket with an artificial twig nest woven into it was placed inside the open-fronted shelter at the rear of the aviary. Although a great deal of interest was shown in the nest initially, the birds only used it as a source of materials, slowly demolishing our careful fabrication twig by twig as they tried to construct their own nest outside in the flight.

I don't know what previous experience the birds had at nest construction, but their attempt was pretty pathetic. They placed an assortment of twigs and leaves in a small platform wedged between the aviary wire and a large log. The whole site was right in the middle of a leafy Redtwig Dogwood and so invisible to our visitors, who could be as close as six feet away. The hen spent quite a bit of time at the nest site and may even have laid though no eggs were ever found.

The following spring, the wire basket nest construction (newly refurbished) was hung outside high up on a wire wall of the aviary. The birds again took great interest in the nest, this time actually adding small pieces of twig and shredded bark to the lining. All went well for a time, with the 23 year old hen laying a small clutch of three eggs which she proceeded to incubate.

Only the hen has been seen to incubate, and she stuck like glue to her first clutch for about two weeks.

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When she did eventually come off the nest we found that two of the eggs had fallen through the twigs and were resting upon the wire mesh of the nest support and the third one had been punctured and had dehydrated. None of the eggs appeared to have been fertile.

The nest was taken down and reconstructed and lined with finer twigs and coarse grasses, to prevent the eggs from falling through the nest fabric again. We replaced the nest and hoped that the pair would recycle and give us all another chance. Six days later the hen laid the first of her second clutch of four eggs, two of which disappeared, the remainder proving infertile.

In 1991, two clutches again were laid, the first of which disappeared (as the birds are Corvids, I was suspicious that chicks were hatching and being eaten by the parents, though this was never confirmed). The second had two fertile eggs, one of which succeeded in hatching in the incubator. Pink, naked, helpless and ugly, with a seemingly huge bill and big, rotund belly, the baby was no beauty! I was handfeeding a Collared Finch-billed Bulbul (*Spizixos semitorques*) at the time, so it was no trouble to accommodate the Bluepie along with the Bulbul, feeding them both on the

same diet of morsels of soaked puppy chow with a dash of yogurt, mixed with hard-boiled egg yolk, finely scraped raw meat, cricket abdomens, "white" mealworms and a sprinkle of Vionate.

The chick grew well with no problems until the time came to transfer both babies into larger accommodation. Moments after that was done, the Bluepie turned upon the smaller Bulbul and would have killed him had I not intervened. Interestingly, the bird grew up and acquired the name of "Sweetie Pie"(!) and became one of the "stars" of the education programs.

In 1992, a second chick was raised by the same means, although the parents did go on to produce a third clutch and hatched four chicks. Curiously, the chicks left with their parents were a much darker, almost purplish pink compared to the pale, bubblegum pink of the handreared birds. Sadly, we experienced a heat wave when they were a week old and, fully exposed to the sun's rays, the chicks overheated and died.

Currently (March 1993), the birds are superbly fit and actively courting and nest building. I plan on pulling a couple of chicks just for safety's sake, but really hope that this year the 26 year old hen will finally succeed in rearing her own young. ●

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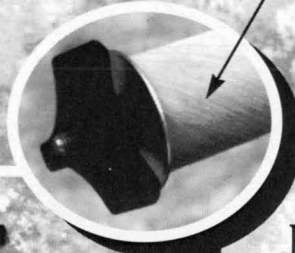
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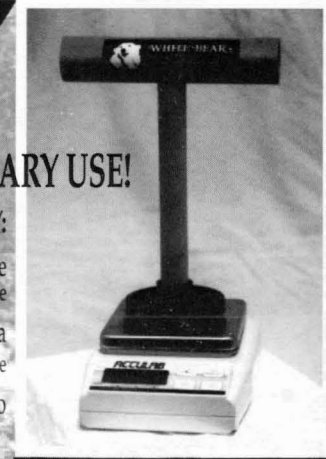
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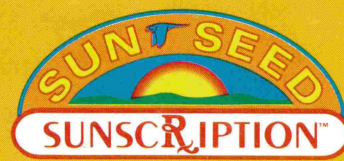
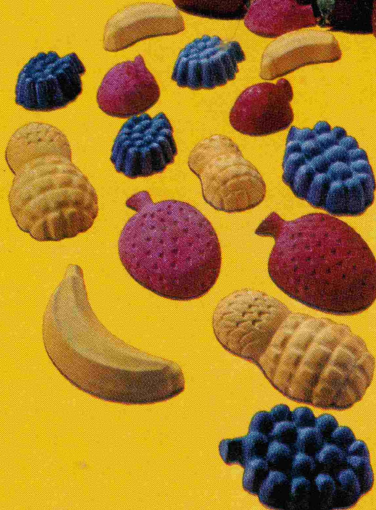
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