

# The Birds: Scattering Blue

written by Guest Contributor | July 25, 2016



I found a blue jay feather resting under a tree at my eldest cousin's wedding reception. The feather was near the barn that housed the live band, between the tent sheltering the dinner tables and the building with the bathroom. Slightly curved and long, it was probably a flight feather from the bird's wing. I only saw the feather in passing, a flash of iridescent blue with black bars. I was two steps past, on my way to the tables and my glass of wine, when it registered. My step hitched for a moment, but I kept walking.

It was August, and family and friends were gathered just outside of Ohio's Cuyahoga Valley National Park, not far from where most of my cousins and I had fledged. Most of my immediate family lived less than an hour from my parents' house, about 40 minutes from Cuyahoga Valley. With twelve of us cousins on my father's side, every holiday and birthday was boisterous. There was always someone your age to play dolls or trains, and, with a few of the adults joining in, we had two full baseball teams. Now grown and with the youngest of us graduated from college, we've dispersed from our natal grounds. Some stayed close in Ohio, others went to Illinois, Wisconsin, Texas, Montana. But every year, be it for major life events or holidays, we migrate back to Ohio.

That Christmas, my aunt gave my grandma a rosary. It had been nearly a year since Grandad died. He'd spent the last few years of his life in a nursing home, the Alzheimer's too advanced for him to live safely at home. The rosary beads were imbedded with the dried and crushed flowers from Grandad's funeral service, flowers I had helped my aunt gather. Or rather I had intended to, but, when the time came after the service, the tears I thought had been exhausted in the mountains behind my house in Montana broke loose. I sobbed into my father's shoulder as we stood in front of his father, exhibiting emotions I'd never seen either man display, though I knew they'd felt. My sister plucked four or five bright stems from the arrangements, the red, orange, and yellow lilies and roses bright against the polished wooden coffin lid.

The beads of the rosary were a pale dusky blue resin flecked with tiny specks of the dried flowers. The color reminded me of the wing patch on a blue-winged teal, or the feet of a waved albatross. Blue, my aunt explained,

because Grandad's eyes were blue, and because he always wore blue plaid button-up shirts. We passed the rosary around the room, everyone's hands cupping, admiring. When it got back to Grandma she held the beads lightly in her hands another moment before putting them back into their small velvet pouch.



Blue jays are striking birds. At first glance, you notice the blue. They have a plain, bright blue head with a crest, and will raise and lower this crest depending on their aggression level. When smoothed to a point, like a slick-backed mobster's haircut, the jay is calm. Nothing has them riled up; no predators are nearby, nothing is threatening their family or their food source. When the crest is raised, feathers standing up like a shield, the jay is agitated, yelling at some affront either real or imagined. A black line extends from the base of the crest under their chin, like a necklace, and then up the other side. Another black line runs from their bill through their eye to the black behind the crest, and there is a splash of white, like mime's makeup, above and below this line.

The feathers on their wings and tail are a slightly iridescent, darker blue, barred with black lines. Each wing, when extended, has two stripes of white: one near the middle, the second along the bottom edge of the wing. There is white along the outer tail feathers too, only visible when the tail is spread in flight. Underneath, a blue jay's chest and stomach are a creamy gray, blending to white near its legs. Their legs are a slate-gray-black, with four long toes on each foot, each toe with a strong, curved claw. Thoreau called them "delicately ornamented," and Audubon "physical perfection."

Growing up, I didn't pay much attention to blue jays. They were relatively big and easy to identify, and therefore not quite as interesting or challenging as the other birds. Colorful, yes, but common. It's funny what we take for granted as children, and how biological splendor in the backyard doesn't get a second look.

A year after I graduated from college, I spent six months in Erie, Pennsylvania, working as a field biologist banding migrating songbirds. In the fall, these birds—tiny hummingbirds, warblers, thrushes, orioles—moved south from Canada to cross Lake Erie, on their way to their wintering grounds in Central and South America. In the spring, the birds headed north, to breeding grounds in the boreal forests or on the Arctic tundra. My coworkers and I set up nets to capture these migrants. Once caught, we would identify and band the birds, releasing them unharmed with a bright metal band clamping around their leg, a permanent identification bracelet.

We sometimes caught blue jays in our nets, some of the largest birds we were equipped to band. The jays would barely fit in a single hand, nearly four times larger than the warblers or chickadees more often caught in our nets. We recorded basic information for each bird we banded; their age, sex, weight. Adult blue jays have black barring on their wing feathers, while the

young birds are unbarred, and a duller shade of blue. I'd also study their eyes, looking for the subtle ring of gray around the iris of the younger birds. Blue jay irises are brown like smooth melted chocolate, and bottomless.

To hold the birds, we use what is called the bander's grip: the bird's head between our index and middle fingers, back to palm, wings held closed and still by the rest of the fingers. This immobilizes the bird so they can't thrash around and get hurt, and also gives easy access to the leg for banding. When held in this manner, birds often grasp your pinky with their feet. Blue jays will dig their sharp claws into skin with unnerving strength, and it takes a firm touch to pry your finger from their grip.

There in Erie I learned about blue jay trances. Going to their "happy places," we called it. The other banders showed me that if you stroked a blue jay on its stomach while holding it in the bander's grip the jay would slowly go stiff. You could release your hold and the bird would lay flat in your palm, unmoving. Or, if its feet had been gripping your finger, you could dangle the blue jay upside-down, bat-like, from your thumb or index finger. There it would hang, unmoving, blinking occasionally. After a few long minutes the jay would suddenly twitch and fly away.

The next time I paid any particular attention to blue jays was at my grandad's funeral, five years later. It was February, and I traded my usual jeans and flannel for crisp black pants and a white shirt, the only clothes I had that were what my mother would consider appropriately dressy and also warm. Missoula, Montana, where I lived, was experiencing a mild winter; Ohio a harsh one. The day of the funeral service the snow fell thick and fast, piling up on the sidewalks, the cars, the roads. I borrowed a pair of my sister's black dress boots, having failed to pack coordinating footwear. I didn't have any thin dress socks, only thick wool, so I wore a pair of Halloween socks I'd left in the dresser in my childhood bedroom. The socks were bright orange, speckled with white and yellow stars and witch hats. I think Grandad would have approved.

Standing in front of the open coffin before calling hours, I stared at the small, decorative blue jays in the flower arrangements. Later, at the cemetery, I heard blue jays calling from the nearby woods. I couldn't watch the priest with her ceremony and ashes, couldn't watch my father or uncles or aunt or grandmother, but I could look out at the trees, steadfast in the falling snow, and listen to the blue jays.

Blue jays are not especially uncommon birds in this part of Ohio, the northeastern corner where the Crooked River twines through forested hills. Though they can be found in any wooded area in the state, blue jays tend to prefer the edges, the liminal habitats where forest gives way to farm field

or meadow. Resident birds, they are loyal to their natal habitats in a way I am not. A year before the wedding, and six months before Grandad's funeral, I moved to Montana for graduate school. Before that I was living in Wyoming; before that Colorado; before that a list of other states, East and West. For someone who studies birds for a living, this is normal. Three months here, maybe six there, working with different species and different projects, following the birds and the funding. I've spend the last few years traveling in crooked lines across the country, but I always find my way home.

Despite years of research, blue jays remain somewhat of a mystery. In the winter some migrate and others stay put, a partial migration. There are no hard-and-fast rules for their behavior, and sometimes a bird will migrate one year and the next it won't. Usually it's the younger birds that migrate, but some adults do too. Others stay, year-round residents. They stay at home, with their families, in familiar territory. There's no way to tell which blue jays will stay and which will go.

I grew up in a house surrounded by trees and farm fields, and my mother has had bird feeders since before I can remember. I don't know when I first learned the shape or call of a blue jay. They are large birds, larger than a robin but slightly smaller than a crow. In their family groups of three or four they would monopolize the feeders and deck railing, their boisterous chatter and dominating presence forcing the other birds to keep their distance. Blue jays are corvids, cousins to crows and ravens. Corvids are known for their intelligence: for their ability to cache hundreds of acorns and find them again months later, for their ability to make and use tools, for their ability to recognize human faces.

A blue jay's call is unmistakable, a piercing and harsh *jeeer*. They're the crass person yelling across a room and not caring who hears them. Sometimes jays will imitate predatory red-tailed hawks, probably to scare other birds away from the food, minimizing competition. Blue jays do produce more musical sounds, like what is called the pumphandle call, a *WHEEdle-ee* whistle that almost sounds as if it belongs on a wind-up toy; and the whisper song, a quiet song of contentment comprised of whirrs, clicks, and whistles, sung when they are alone and relaxed.

Alexander Wilson, a nineteenth century Scottish-American ornithologist, described blue jays as being, "... distinguished as a kind of beau among feathered tenants of our woods, by the brilliancy of his dress; and like most other coxcombs, makes himself still more conspicuous by his loquacity, and the oddness of his tones and gestures."

I can't imagine Grandad ever dressed like a coxcomb, not with his penchant for blue plaid and apparent disregard for the rest of his appearance. He was always presentable, but never what you'd call a dandy—though I'm sure he'd have a cheesy pun about it if he could, probably something about a 'beau' tie. The only tie I remember Grandad wearing featured the image of Donald Duck. He'd use a clothespin for a tie-clip, and would usually greet us grandchildren in his Donald Duck voice, which then prompted five or six of us

to spend the next ten minutes puffing up our cheeks and drooling all over ourselves in attempts to also imitate Donald. I seem to remember my eldest cousin being the best, sometimes even better than Grandad. I was impressed by this, and I wonder how much they both practiced. The things we do for the entertainment of others.

When I think of Grandad, I remember a white beard and a smile. There were the Santa Claus years, when his normally closely-trimmed beard got a bit wild, and the unruly facial hair made him look like he'd just come from a long tramp in the woods. He always wore button-up shirts, usually a soft blue plaid, nothing like the starkly contrasting blue and black and white of a blue jay. Flipping through family photo albums, the assembled grandchildren get taller, their faces more defined, their hair longer or shorter, their clothes reflecting the current era: the 80's, the 90's, the early 2000's. But Grandad's blue plaid remained constant, never out of style—not that he would have cared. The changes over time in our albums remind me of the similar changes in my field guides: the paintings are unmistakably a chickadee or a blue jay, but as they become more modern the illustrations become more detailed. Or perhaps it's that I know what field marks to look for now. Sometimes, when I study family photographs, it's like looking at species accounts for ivory-billed woodpeckers or passenger pigeons. I know, deep down, that they're gone. But I still yearn.

I have an old book of puns, written by Bill Keene, that Grandad wanted me to have years before he died. A small slip of paper with my name written on it is taped to the cover. As a child, I took to writing out jokes and puns in the cards and letters I'd write my grandparents, my repertoire and subject matter expanding substantially once my parents had a computer with internet access. I wasn't clever enough, nor patient enough, to come up with my own jokes, as Grandad did. But those were my offerings, sometimes I think because I didn't know what else to write.

It wasn't until after I graduated from college that I started writing rhyming poems about animals for Grandad. The poems were mainly about birds that I had held or studied, and were accompanied by pictures of me holding them. When I gave him the first book, he was still able to read, to turn the pages on his own. The rhymes made him chuckle as he read them slowly aloud. I couldn't tell if he actually understood them, or if he simply enjoyed the idea of the rhymes, the way they sounded and felt in his mouth.

About a year after the first book, a trip to Asia inspired more poems and I put together a second volume. When I told my dad, he paused. Grandad's not reading anymore, he said. I hadn't been home for a visit in a few months, but this didn't surprise me. On a good day, Grandad could articulate some of the words, and could repeat the rhyming pairs. Other days he could barely hold the book up while my grandma turned the pages. But rhymes still made him smile, so I kept writing them.

Of the 27 or so poems I wrote, none involved blue jays. One of the first was simply titled "Woodpecker:"

How much wood has a woodpecker pecked?

Only the usual amount, I suspect.

They're looking for insects under the bark—

What'd you think, that they'd bang up their heads for a lark?

I covered an odd assortment of specific species: Cedar Waxwing, Northern Saw-whet Owl, Blue-winged Teal, Blue-footed Booby, Raven, Roseate Spoonbill, Cooper's Hawk, Sandhill Crane, Trumpeter Swan—all birds of which I had pictures. Others poems were more general: Goose, Chicken, Woodpecker, Mockingbird, Owl, Penguin. I sometimes think of compiling my poems into a book and trying to get it published, with watercolor illustrations by one of my cousins. I haven't talked to her about this, and I haven't worked on seriously compiling a manuscript. And I haven't written any new poems since Grandad died.



A couple years ago, while waiting for a flight to Ohio in the Denver airport, I wandered into one of the gift shops that line the terminal and bought a pair of blue jay earrings. I was not particularly drawn to blue jays, not back then, though blue has always been a color I gravitate towards. Buying those earrings was an impulse, one I didn't question at the time and one I don't question now. I don't wear crosses or other religious symbols, but I do wear birds.



In bird feathers, there is no blue pigment. The color blue comes from black, which comes from the pigment melanin. This pigment is produced by the birds when they oxidize an amino acid called tyrosine, and acts as an antioxidant. Melanin, in varying concentrations, makes feathers black, brown, grey, tan, or reddish brown—earth tones. The more melanin granules in a feather, the darker the color. When these granules are arranged in a certain way, tucked neatly between tiny air pockets in the feather barbs, they are seen as blue. If those same feathers are ground to powder, the resulting dust is black. Blue isn't real, in a way. It's just a trick of the eye, a bending of light. Coherent scattering they call it, the way the light particles bounce off the structure of a feather, reflecting into our human eyes as blue. A structural color, instead of purely a pigmented one.

Feathers with melanin in them are strong. Many birds, even ones that are primarily white like gulls or snow geese, will have black flight feathers. These feathers, on a bird's wings and tail, are directly responsible for the bird's ability to fly. They take a lot of wear-and-tear; worn down from airborne particles, brushed against bushes and trees, dragged on the ground. Melanin also protects against bacteria that would break down feathers. I studied parrot feathers in a lab once, and I watched as the black feathers in their flasks of feather-eating bacteria remained seemingly unchanged while the white feathers disappeared, dissolved into the bacteria-laden medium. Melanic feathers, especially the blacks and browns and blues, hold up best.

Feathers grow in tubes, circular sheaths, which break apart as the feathers push up through the skin. When feathers unfurl from their sheaths to cover a bird they are dead, like mammal hair or fingernails. Each year, often multiple times a year, a bird will molt these feathers and grow new.

When memory starts to unfurl, when the Alzheimer's sets in, coherence scatters. Things that were once easy are now lost: how to drive a car, how to tie your shoes, the names of your grandchildren. But Grandad wasn't a blue jay, and I can't pretend that his coherence scattering was beautiful.

When I want to write about blue jays, I have access to reams of information. Field guides, encyclopedias, scientific studies, all seconds away from my fingertips on the internet. When I want to write about Grandad, I rely on memories, faulty at best, and on stories half-remembered from childhood. Stories I wrote for myself from pictures in old albums, piecing together threads of memory with photographic evidence. I can learn from the research that's already been done. But there will be no further line of questioning, no further hypotheses to be tested. There are still questions, but there will be no definitive answers.



One winter years ago, while home from college for Thanksgiving break, I built a snowman on the deck. It ended up being chest high, maybe three feet tall. I used seashells, mementos from years of family vacations to the coast of North Carolina now piled in Mom's flower bed, for eyes and buttons. Broken sticks for a mouth and nose, two longer branches for arms, and snapped twigs for a spiky hairdo. I stuck a suet feeder on one arm and a Frisbee full of sunflower seeds on top of its head. Then, I went back inside, stripped off my damp layers, made hot chocolate, and sat at the kitchen table in front of the window and watched. Birds came quickly through the falling snow—juncos, chickadees, cardinals. Birds of my childhood, of Ohio, of home.

I took a picture of a single blue jay, perched in the Frisbee full of bird seed on the top of my smiling snowman. The blue jay is out of focus, blurry through the sliding glass door, but you can see the mouthful of sunflower seed, the bright blue back, the black collar and dark eye. The vivid blue bird, balanced on the snow, about to fly away.



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