

BLUE JAYS

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I

On the farm in Tennessee, the old people used to say that the jays were always excited on Fridays. You didn't even need to check the calendar to know when that day came. But the rest of us could tell little difference: the jays always seemed excited and full of scolding.

Whenever we kids would try to help a baby blue jay back up to its nest in the black walnut tree, all of the jays on the farm would gather to shriek at us. Some of them took turns swooping down close to our heads. "You kids leave that bird alone," came the cry from the kitchen window, "or you'll get your eyes pecked out." They all knew of someone that had happened to, though none of the old ones ever said who. So we would stand a safe distance away and watch the baby bird almost turn himself inside out, so wide did his blue beak call for help. When we could no longer stand the bird's anxiety and our frustration, we ran away, usually to the barn. When we got back, Granny would try again to explain that even if we got the bird back to the nest, the parent birds would have nothing to do with it because it smelled human, or if they did, would only kill it. "Jays are like people in that," she would frown, crimping the pie crust. "They'll bite off their nose to spite their face."

We nodded, though we really didn't understand. It **was** true that the animals we tried to save usually died—the wild birds with their diced worms, the rabbit with his eye-dropper of milk. I remember we had some intense theoretical discussion along the way about whether it would have made any difference—in the bird's life or death—if someone had been willing to pre-chew the worms; but no one ever tried this means of resuscitation. A chicken snake did eat, or rather swallow, a hen egg, but since he escaped from the basket before the next morning, we were never sure he digested it. A baby possum might have lived if he hadn't hidden from us so successfully in the toe of one of Mama's winter slippers and died there.

The old ones usually told us that our efforts in wildlife management would be futile, but we never stopped trying until we moved away from home. They were probably right about the blue jays, too.

II

The only time I ever went to the far West was to get married, and the honeymoon was four days in a cabin among the redwoods near the Big Sur. I remember the blue jays more than the redwoods, though. After getting up the first morning, I went outside onto a little deck built flush with the cabin; waiting for me were about twenty blue jays, half on the banister and half in the pine trees screaming. The noise must have awakened me, and the first thing I thought of was: it must be Friday. Sure enough.

These jays were different from the ones on the farm. Not only did they look different—the crests on them were particularly weird—but the California jays had a completely different personality from their Tennessee cousins. The Tennessee jays are downright mean, but consistent; they wouldn't take a crust of bread even if they were starving, except in winter when they accept it as their due. But the California birds crowded up close until I got the idea and went in search of sunflower seeds. They quickly swallowed down all available morsels, heads tilted back like old men gargling; then, they strutted back and forth making squawking sounds, preening their feathers, and generally calling attention to themselves.

Long before the four days were up, I had had enough of these jays to last me for a long time. I wondered what my grandmother might have said about them, maybe something about "living in California, they probably can't help it," or maybe her more general all-purpose advice about "if you can't say something nice, don't say anything at all." But then she never had much use for **her** jays and they generously repaid the compliment. On the last morning, though, I went out early to see if the birds were less noisy on Mondays. It seemed to me they were, but then they were noisy enough on any day.

III

One of the things I most miss by living in the midwest is the crowd of blue jays I grew up with. It seems to me I never really appreciated them, filling the air with their everlasting scolding. But, as the old ones might have observed, they do help you know where you are.

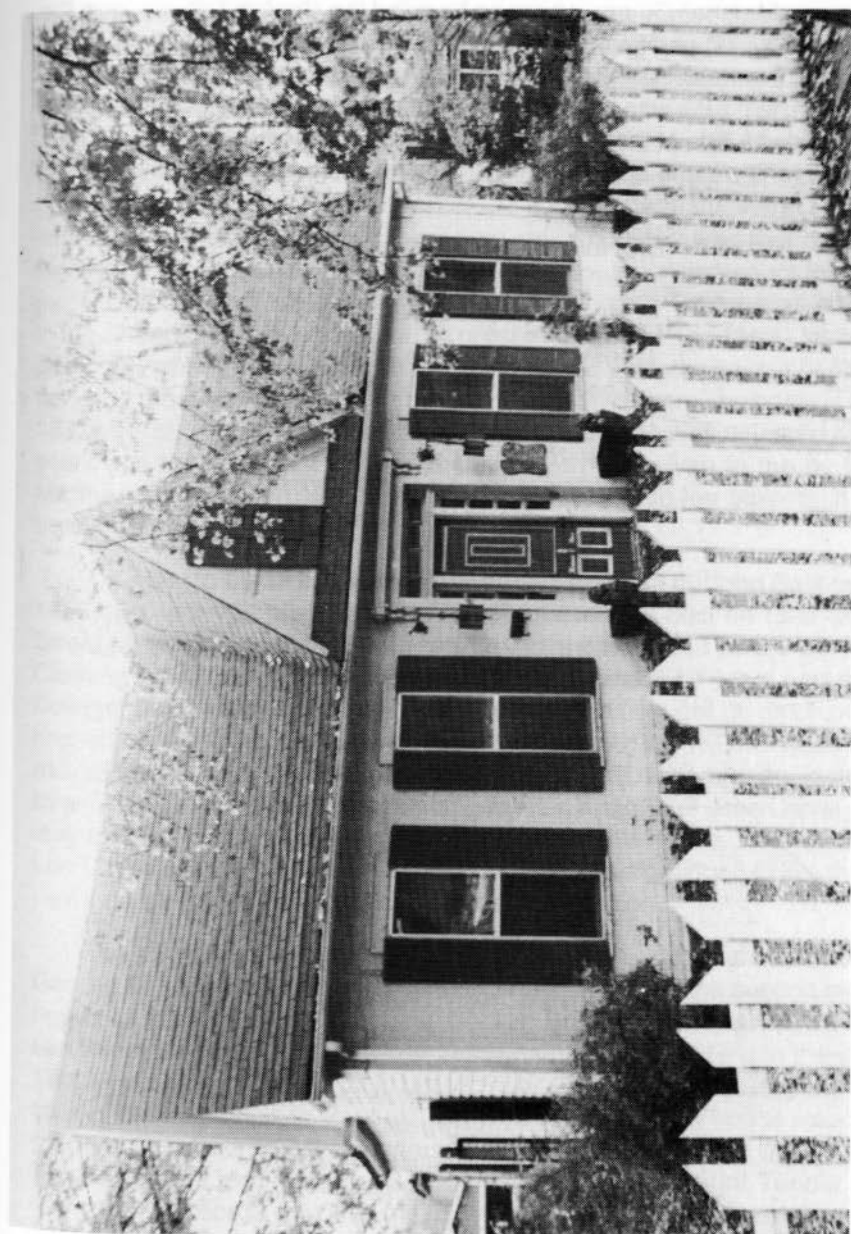
We have jays in Minnesota, but they are no longer the majority party. They have too much competition from the ducks and loons, not to mention sparrows. In Tennessee, all those birds are kept in their places, except the loon, who has no place there at all. Even the cardinals, state birds all, are warned off the territory when the jays are about.

Leaving the house with my daughter the other day, I heard a solitary jay screaming his lungs out in a birch tree.

"You can always tell when it's Friday," I said to her. "The blue jays are **always** excited on Fridays."

"Daddy, it's Wednesday," she said.

"Well, if we were in Tennessee and your great-grandmother were alive, it would be Friday."



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Photo by Bobbie Foust