

Second Place Writing – Age 10-13
Rowan Heglie – Ashland, OR

Backyard Jays

This year four Western Scrub-Jays hatched in some conifers behind our house. Ever since, they have been visiting our yard to eat, conduct experiments, bathe and drink. In their earlier days they did not know what to eat, where the food was, or how to perch.

What to eat? They would try many different things to see what was edible, and what was not, for example; pomegranate buds, lady banksia rose leaves, duck weed and the like. After a few weeks of worms and pomegranate buds, they learned to eat seeds, bugs and any other food a jay would like. They still ate pomegranate buds. The Western Scrub-Jays are the bird version of Peter Pan; (no, not the flying part) they play and goof-off their entire lives. They don't seem to want to grow up.

Where is the food? The first thing the jays did after finding good food was to look for more places the "good food" was found. They looked in the watering can, they looked in the enclosed laundry porch, they looked in buckets, and they looked in the compost (success!). They finally looked in the feeders.

How do I perch? The jays learned how to lock their legs, but not until after some accidents. Once a jay was flying and was newly hatched. It decided it needed to rest. It surveyed for a place to land and decided upon a nice patch of grass. The "grass," as it found out, was actually duckweed on our pond. It flew straight into the water and floundered around for a few moments before clambering out and drying off. They would also fall off of perches and go upside down. Eventually they learned how to perch.

When Western Scrub-Jays are young, they look very different from the adults; they are gray overall and have flatter bills. I watched them as they grew up, and noticed the different stages of their first basic molt. They seem to molt their flight feathers first, then their heads and lastly their backs. It was very interesting watching them in their in between stages of molt. The jays are now in their full adult plumage and are a stunningly crisp blue; whenever they visit our feeders I do a double-take.