

A tale of "Old Whiskey"

(A rejuvenated bluebird)

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On 5 August 1976, a telephone call from a college professor alerted me to a possible tragedy in a bluebird box at the professor's home. No parents had been seen all day at the nest, so I suggested waiting a day, watching for one or both parent birds, then looking into the box. The report came back that one baby bird was dead and the remaining three looked cold and nearly lifeless. It was now possible that something had happened to both parents, so I inherited three baby bluebirds, eyes open, and feathered.

I put them in a warm towel in a shoe box and tried feeding them with a toothpick. Mouths opened at once, and they received their little bits of cat food in good style. If they would take food, they had a chance. They responded so well to the warmth and food that during the evening they became very active. I then placed them in a bird cage.

Soon I was collecting grapes, blueberries, blackberries, worms, and bugs to supplement their diet. Once in a while I added grit and a drop of cod liver oil, but basically I fed them cat food. They were banded with numbers 1171-06374, 75, and 76, and were weighed and measured. I tried to make their measurements as accurate as possible by taking them each day at approximately 1600 hours. These data were taken until the birds were released.

On 7 August, a Saturday, at 1300 hours, I released the largest bird, #75, and it flew up into the apple tree in back of our home. The cage containing the other two birds was hung outside so that the one flying might come back to them to be fed. But, unexpectedly, a very cold thunderstorm came up late that evening, and that night I did not see the bird. Sunday afternoon about 1700 hours I was walking in the vegetable garden, looking in the trees for the bluebird, when my eye was caught by a bit of blue on the ground among the potato plants. Having earlier planted a form of blue potato, I stooped down to see why they had matured so rapidly. My heart

Table 1. Weights and measurements

Date	No.	Wing	Weight
8-5 Whiskey	74	72	24.8
	75	77	23.8
	76	70	21.2
8-6	74	72	23.6
	75	80	25.3
	76	73	22.2
8-7	74	72	24.2
	75	released	
	76	76	22.2
8-8	74	72	24.6
	75	80	21.2
	76	(found nearly dead)	22.8
8-9	74	72	25.0
	75	80	21.5
	76	80	22.3
8-10	74	82	24.0
	75	83	21.0
	76	82	21.4
8-12	74	85	26.1
	75	87	24.0
	76	85	23.4
8-13	74	87	25.2
	75	87	22.6
	76	83	23.7
8-14	74	87	26.3
	75	88	25.7
	76	86	23.7
8-15	74	87	26.6
	75	released	
	76	86	24.6
8-16	74	87	26.5
	75	90	25.4
	76	87	25.4
8-17	74	87	26.3
	75	free	
	76	free	
8-18	74	87	25.2
8-19	74	87	28.2
8-20	74	87	27.2
8-21	74	87	28.7

Weights and measurements taken at approximately 1600 hours each day.



beat faster as I bent down, because I saw that it was the bird, apparently dead. I picked it up and placed it against my bare stomach, calling to my wife to place a woolen sock in the oven to get warm.

We quickly put the bird in a warm sock, filled an eye dropper with warm milk and a drop of whiskey, and forced some into his mouth. No response. At 1800 hours the bird tried to swallow. Suddenly, at 2000 hours, just as we had given up hope, the bird struggled out of the wrap, sat on the edge of the sock, and started calling. Guess he wanted another shot of whiskey! We quickly named him "Whiskey" and placed him with the other birds. (We were able to determine his sex as his feathers matured.)

We kept the birds until the 14th, and with trepidation and worry about the weather, we released all three. Happily, they all returned to feed at 1830 hours, led by "Old Whiskey" and were put in their cage for the night.

The next day we released them at 1100 hours, and they stayed on the roof all day. I fed them by tossing food up to all three. A storm approached at 1630 hours, and again "Old Whiskey" led the group back to the cage.

On the 16th we released them at 0700 hours and I fed them on the roof, using a stick to hold the food. My wife commented, "Where else would you find a grown man walking around in his back yard holding a cherry on a stick and calling 'Here Whiskey, Here Whiskey?'" However, Old Whiskey came directly down onto the porch rail to be fed. Number 74 had somehow injured its

wing and lost some primary feathers so that it could not fly; it remained in the cage.

That night both #76 and Old Whiskey stayed out all night. We were worried and anxiously waited for dawn so that we could check on them. They were on the porch in good shape and calling to be fed. I hung the injured bird's cage on an apple tree, and the others came down to visit it regularly.

The two birds stayed with us the rest of the summer. On 26 August the bluebirds did not take food from me but we saw them feeding on the ground. On 27 August, while I was feeding a baby robin, an adult robin gave an alarm note and both bluebirds came from somewhere and dove at me in defense of the young robin. They were also giving alarm notes.

We saw one bluebird feeding on 29 September. This one came down to the cage with #74 at 1800 hours and we later saw him on the clothesline near bluebird houses. We thought it was Old Whiskey. Occasionally he had been taking food from the roof, where we left raw hamburger, cat food, and grapes for him.

On 30 September the neighbor's cat caught and killed a bluebird. It was #76. Old Whiskey was still flying and feeding in the area.

In the spring of 1977 we saw a male bluebird visit our crippled bird. He stayed on or around the cage for several days. We hoped it was one of the family coming back, but we could not confirm it. He was banded, however, so perhaps it was Old Whiskey returning again. ☺

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