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Commentary: Who's afraid of a little blue bird?



A scrub jay takes a peanut from David McGrath's hand. (Courtesy of David McGrath)



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While the bird flu has medical professionals and scientists worried about its spread last year to hundreds of thousands of cows, chickens, and other mammals, including some human beings, it has not stopped people in my neighborhood from hand feeding wild ones.

According to the CDC, H5 bird flu has infected flocks of birds throughout the world, contaminating [41 U.S. dairy herds, 150 million poultry, and sickening 70 citizens, leaving one person dead.](#)

But enthusiastic bird lovers in southwest Florida cannot seem to resist feeding scrub jays, cousins to the bluejay and a protected species, which land on their arms, shoulders, hands, and even on their hats, for a chance at an unsalted peanut.

Most human beings infected elsewhere have been agricultural workers exposed to farm animals mainly in California, Colorado, and Washington. But there have been no outbreaks in Florida, and non-migratory scrub jays are not, therefore, a threat to import the disease from faraway places.

The risk is minimal, but why chance it?

Probably because the birds are amazing.

Inhabiting undeveloped land and vacant lots full of trees, plants, and wild "scrub," the fearless jay with its blue head, wings, and tail, and white forehead and neck, will fly down from a limb and land on a person's outstretched arm to pick up the irresistible morsel with its beak.

And rather than return to the tree, the jay will often swoop to the ground to bury its treasure in the dirt to hide it from rivals and save for a rainy day.

Odds of a bird flu pandemic are low but uncertain, again according to the CDC. The virus is constantly evolving and adapting as it spreads to other species, so scientists are preparing for the slim possibility. At present, there is no vaccine available for people, but companies like Moderna are working on one.

Scrub jays are exceptionally smart, able to remember the hiding places to which they return to dig up their food.

Devilishly smart, according to author and [amateur ornithologist Jennifer Ackerman, who reports that some blue jays are thieves](#) who will watch where another jay buries its food, will wait till it leaves, and then glide down and dig it up.

That's only half of it: if one bird knows another is watching, it may "fake cache" the peanut it has scored, pretending to bury it but, instead, flying off and secreting it elsewhere when the thief is not looking. Which implies, incredibly, that jays and, possibly, other bird species are able to imagine what another bird might be thinking!

Occasionally spying the busy colorful birds on my morning bike ride, I began to understand why humans are attracted. It's the same urge people have to swim with dolphins, or get close to whales or other intelligent creatures, activities proven to lower blood pressure and trigger the release of endorphins which can reduce stress and anxiety, improve mood, and impart a celestial sense of well being.

[Shayan Sharif, VP of research of the Arrell Food Institute in Toronto](#), said that because the avian flu can spread so rapidly across continents when carried by flocks of migratory wild birds, that a pandemic of bird flu, if it evolves to facilitate person to person transmission, could be much worse and more fatal than Covid ever was.

The best preventive strategy, Sharif believes, is close and timely monitoring of wild flocks to quickly “cul” (kill) all that are infected. But that is a laborious, time consuming, and expensive undertaking, which has lately been hampered in the U.S. by the Trump administration’s cuts to the medical research work force.

On a recent bike ride, I stopped to watch a woman standing near a bridge, her arm upraised to the sky. Possibly in her forties, her long blonde hair gathered in a ponytail, she told me she couldn’t get over how smart the birds were. Cardinals, robins, blackbirds gathered around to cautiously take her offerings, staying ten feet away. Only the scrub jays were intrepid enough to land on her, aggressively swiping a peanut, then swooping down nearby to bury it in the dirt.

“It feels good,” she said.

I described the scene to Marianne when I got home, and how my heart flipped when a bold and beautiful scrub jay, gliding low, landed on my new friend’s forearm.

"Sounds like you'd like to try it?" she said.

I hesitated.

"They're endangered and It's illegal," I said. "Disrupts their natural behavior."

"That's not what I asked."

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