

WHEN A NUTCRACKER BECOMES TAME

WITH ONE ILLUSTRATION

By LILA M. LOFBERG

On the evening of May 26, 1928, as I went to call and feed the birds, I found a fully grown Nutcracker fluttering about the yard with a broken wing. I brought him inside and with the help of Mr. Lofberg proceeded to make splints and to set and bind the broken wing. This was according to telephonic advice of Dr. McNeill, of Big Creek, thirty-four miles away.

We then placed the Nutcracker (*Nucifraga columbiana*) on a bench of our breakfast nook. He immediately hopped to the handle of a fruit basket that was on the table. We took the fruit out and placed papers beneath him. There he staid until morning. Meanwhile we had to force food down his throat and give him water with a spoon, since we find that birds refuse to eat naturally the first few hours in captivity.

The next morning a small pine tree was fastened onto a movable base and with papers beneath it was placed on the screened porch. There "Pep" (as we named him) had more freedom. He hopped mostly among the branches of this tree the first few days. Every few moments we would ask "Does Pep wish some egg?" Soon his mouth would fly open without the least coaxing. In the afternoon I took him out of doors and let him hop around. He tried to escape once but I brought him back and after that he tried to amuse himself by eating the pencil, as he sat on top of my writing board. Already he was learning what I meant when I said "Pep, come on finger".

I shall here explain more fully how we teach the wild birds during the first few hours we have them. Always they are given a name and always they are addressed with it. Usually, we want to impress them with the first word of any command or sentence. Very seldom do we place our hands over them, but request them to "Come on finger", tapping the finger while reiterating the statement several times. Perhaps the bird will hop away. We follow and, again placing the finger in front of his feet, keep right on saying the same thing in the same way. Eventually we pick up one foot and place it on the finger, then we place the other one there. Usually they cling as though on a stick. Then we carry them to whatever spot we want them to be in. Only when that was the reason for which we went to them in the first place do we repay their efforts with food. Very often we do it only to teach them or because they have hopped onto forbidden territory.

Never has it taken a bird longer than to the third day to learn its name, to step on our finger, to take food and water from our hands of its own free will, and to realize we are its friends. Going on with the details of Pep's training, I will say that in a general way his reactions were much the same as those of some of his predecessors, though some were of entirely different species. I will say that birds of the Jay family, so far as our experience is concerned, learn much more quickly than any of the others. Having learned these things they no longer rebel against the new mode of life.

Pep, being a very bright pupil, was even willing for me to give him a bath in the kitchen sink, on his third day. His bandaged wing of course made it impossible for him to perform his daily ablutions. He seemed to enjoy having me do all the work anyway, and would perch close by to dry and preen his feathers the best he could. And it was on this afternoon that he was allowed to go out in the yard

by himself. I staid inside, watching through a window to see what he would do. He hopped onto and around all the yard furniture, went to the bird bath to drink, but made no attempt to leave the yard. Later I went out and lay down on a cot to take a nap. He came hopping onto my shoulder and called until I opened my eyes. This subsequently he would invariably do. While I was doing my work, he would hop around the house. Or if I went out of doors to feed the chickens, he liked to hop to my shoulders or head and ride around with me.

By the fifth day he was trained enough so that he was allowed the freedom of the yard without any supervision. A few times I would see that he had hopped out of the yard, but he was always willing to "come on finger" and thus be conveyed back. Soon, however, he never even attempted to go under the fence. Naturally



Fig. 65. TAME NUTCRACKERS AT FEEDING STATION. THE BIRD ON THE LEFT WAS THE ONE NAMED "PEP".

he was feeding a lot with the birds that came to the yard. But because I reserved his favorite foods, cheese, yolk of hard boiled egg, and butter, for hand feeding, he would come hopping to me whenever I called.

Long after he became perfectly free he liked to drink from a spoon. Many times as I washed the dishes he would hop to the drain board and peck at the silver until I gave him a "wee drap". We caught flies for him and soon had only to say "Pep! want fly, fly?" to have him come for them. He caught many mosquitoes on the wing, whenever they came near us, out of doors. He would be sitting on the arm of our chair, when snap! would go that long bill of his and another pest was gone.

Up until the third week of his captivity this bird was perfectly content to play in the yard with pine cones, or most any thing that came his way. Then one morning he found he could climb up the garden hose (it was looped on the fence) to the top of the fence; thence to the awning that covers our beds, and from there to the low branches of a tall tree. The first time he did this, I went out to call him and when there was no Pep in sight I became worried. With his bound wing he was perfectly helpless of course. Soon, however, he answered from the very top of the tree. In a little while he was calling for food at the back door. After that he spent most of the daytime in the tree, coming down only for food and to sleep.

On June 10, we had regular winter weather. Pep staid inside. As it was Sunday I spent most of the day reading while Pep played on the arm of my chair. I

gave him paper which he tore to bits. If I became too interested in my book he would perch on my shoulder, pull at my dress and jabber until I talked to him.

On the twentieth day I decided to take him with me on an eight mile hike. He had gone with me on short walks before, sitting happily on my shoulder or finger. I placed a stick across the top of my pack board, fastening it securely. There he rode, just beyond my shoulder. He talked, pulled at my collar, and pecked at his perch, but he showed no inclination to leave me.

After going two miles I stopped for him to eat and drink. He hopped around an old log, near the little stream, getting insects to supplement the roast lamb that I had brought for him. He would come to me every few moments to peck at my pencil as he perched himself on the writing board. He also played in a small juniper tree, becoming quite excited when a pack train passed near-by, with its quota of dogs. He came rushing to me and clambered up on top of my head, until they were out of sight and hearing.

At the trail camp he had a grand time investigating things around the cook tent. At another camp he dined, and played atop the pack board when a small dog made him afraid to venture away from it. A chance to ride a horse home could not be overlooked. Luckily I had a small box along, since I had not been sure of Pep's actions on such a long trip and had gone prepared. At first he resented being trapped, but soon he was pecking away at a bit of string that was hanging inside his box.

We were as nervous as young "medicos" with a first case when we took the splints off his wing, the next day; but the wing seemed to have healed perfectly. Of course it was weak and it was several days before he ventured far in real flight. He practiced hour after hour of half fluttering, half hopping around the yard, until full confidence returned. Just as soon as he became as active as the others, he was left to his own devices. He slept and stayed out of doors whenever he chose. Naturally it was flattering to our vanity when he "chose" to treat us with the same camaraderie after he became strong, as he had when he was helpless. We would hear a call at the back door, and there would be Pep ready to enter and have his food from the same chair that was his before, or perhaps beg for a drink of water from a spoon. A guest was sitting in his "food chair" one day and he stuffed his surplus butter down her neck. And she positively encouraged him to do it!

His trusting us encouraged the wild Nutcrackers to do likewise. Several times one of the latter would hop through the door and eat with Pep from his personal table inside. I carried a small tin box about with scraps of their favorite foods, and Pep was continually coming to me to be fed whenever I was in the yard. We sleep in the yard during the summer months and every morning about five Pep would come, hop onto my chest and awaken me for his first feeding. It was not long until the wild ones were doing the same thing. They would tug at the blankets and screech until I opened the box. For about an hour we would play with them in this manner. Starting the day by laughing at their antics, meant much more to us than that extra hour of sleep. It is a most thrilling experience to awaken with these watchful eyes peering from the trees, or from over the top of our awnings.

Most of our meals are eaten, when the weather permits, on the open front porch. The moment the Nutcrackers heard the rattle of dishes and silver they would gather on the fence a few feet from us. Never could we put food on, until one of us was there to watch it. Often they ate all the food from their box, ere we had finished ours. Then they got most of ours, too!

For years we have entertained people by calling the Nutcrackers at certain feeding times and have them come swooping from every direction, at our call. But this last summer, thanks to Pep, they became tamer than we had ever dreamt possible.

After they left for their sojourn of the autumn months at the higher altitudes, we found that awakening early was not nearly so much fun as it had been when they were here to awaken us. But since all things come to him who waits, we are anxiously awaiting their return and hoping that our "Pep" will be among those present.

Florence Lake, California, November 27, 1928.