

HUMMINGBIRD AND NON-FORAGING SAPSUCKER

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Two recent articles in *Blue Jay* described incidents involving the close association of a Ruby-throated Hummingbird with a species of woodpecker: in one the hummingbird accompanied a flying Yellow-bellied Sapsucker, and in the other the hummingbird hovered about a foraging Hairy Woodpecker.^{2 5} The descriptions prompted me to look up an entry I had made in my journal on 24 June 1971.

It is widely known that Ruby-throated Hummingbirds feed on the running sap at sapsucker diggings and probably rely on this food source in early spring before flowers are blooming and yielding nectar.¹ Therefore it is not unlikely to see hummingbirds associated with sapsuckers. My observation of 16 years ago, however, was noteworthy because of the sapsucker's own activity and of the hummingbird's continuous presence despite the non-foraging nature of this activity.

In the early 1970s each summer we had several sapsuckers about our farmyard, 5 km east of Rosthern. A row of Balsam Poplars on one side of the yard revealed series upon series of holes drilled for sap, and the birds routinely landed on the Manitoba Maples about the house and worked their way up the bare trunks in search of insects. On occasion one would flit to the ground to catch an insect. My observation concerned this bird's activities on the ground, in association with the Ruby-throated Hummingbird. It was early evening, and there was still bright sunlight.

Pough reports that sapsuckers prefer "to be near water," and Merriam in Pearson refers to the birds as "noisy, rollocking

fellows."^{4 3} Both characteristics, of habitat and of voice, were evident in my observation. My journal reads as follows: "At a rut in our lane which was filled with rain-water, a sapsucker alighted to take a bath. It hopped up to the water and then bent forward, much like a human swimmer about to start swimming. It submerged almost its entire body and did submerge its whole head. When so immersed, it quivered its body and then straightened up backwards, erupting from the water where it still sat while emitting its woodpecker "laugh." Then the dipping process was repeated, ending again with the boisterous cry. The bird seemed like a mechanical toy — its pivot being its feet — for all the world like the familiar cast-iron woodpecker ornament which spears toothpicks from a hollow iron log. The bird repeated its action four or five times: a bow forward, submersion, a shudder, a springing back accompanied by that "laugh."

"What added further interest to the scene was the presence of a Ruby-throated Hummingbird which had flown behind the sapsucker when it first landed for its bath. During the bird's ablutions, the hummingbird hovered above, then made frequent swoops at the bather, who in turn paid not the least attention to the little dive-bomber."

The hummingbird would have been about 0.5 m distant when hovering, while its swoops took it within a few centimetres of the sapsucker's head. The hummingbird kept up its actions until the woodpecker flew away.

It may be that the hummingbird had

previously followed sapsuckers to their diggings for the sap, as suggested by Knapton et al., and was doing so now, only the woodpecker stopped at a puddle instead of the poplars.² Then again, the hummingbird, as suggested by Sealy,³ may have been investigating the red patch on the sapsucker's forehead, for hummingbirds are attracted to red coloring.⁵ It was during this same time period that I was raising Scarlet Runner Beans in the vegetable garden alongside the lane, and these plants with their red blossoms were much visited by hummingbirds.

¹ DENNIS, J.V. 1981. Beyond the bird feeder.

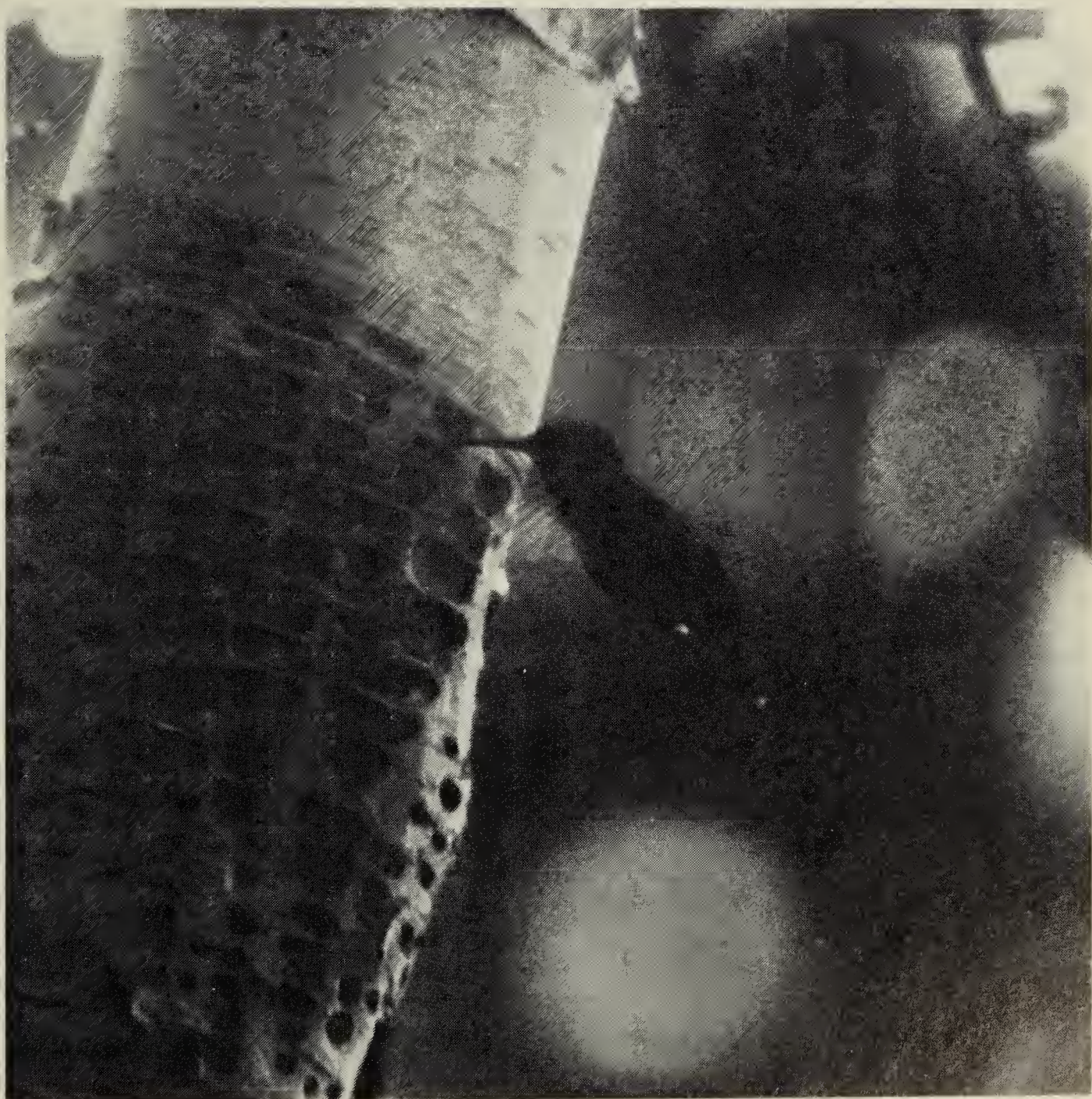
A.A. Knopf, New York, 201 pp.

² KNAPTON, R.W., R.V. CARTAR and J.D. REYNOLDS. 1985. Do hummingbirds follow sapsuckers to food sources? *Blue Jay* 43:186-187.

³ PEARSON, T.G. et al. 1936. *Birds of America*. Garden City Books, Garden City, N.Y. 3 Vol.:272 pp., 271 pp., 289 pp.

⁴ POUGH, R.H. 1949. *Audubon bird guide*. Doubleday, Garden City, N.Y. 312 pp.

⁵ SEALY, S.G. 1986. Ruby-throated Hummingbirds associating with a foraging Hairy Woodpecker. *Blue Jay* 44:241-242.



Ruby-throated Hummingbird at Emma Lake, Saskatchewan.

Anonymous