

UNUSUAL RUBY-THROATED HUMMINGBIRD ENCOUNTERS AND A LATE FALL RECORD

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Bird watching has been an interest of our family for several years now, especially since moving to our present home in southeastern Manitoba. We live in a 3-acre wooded property near the town of Steinbach. The surrounding woods consist primarily of aspen poplar and bur oak. Saskatoon, chokecherry, pin cherry, wild plum, and hazelnut are also plentiful. We maintain two seed-feeding stations year round, offering sunflower seeds, as well as suet or lard during very cold weather. One feeding station is located in the front yard amongst a cluster of poplar and birch; a nearby birdbath offers clean water. The second feeder is located on the east side of the house, at the edge of the bush, and allows the more timid birds to feed when the jays or squirrels are monopolizing the main station.

Our third station, a hummingbird feeder, is perhaps our favourite. It hangs from a branch of a poplar tree directly in front of our door. Since our home is built on a concrete slab, the doors open at ground level, thus offering a pleasant sense of continuity between indoors and out. Our feeder is filled with a concentrated sugar-water solution coloured red with food dye. Although I realize that the red colouring is no longer required once the birds have located the feeder, I

keep the solution red all summer because I enjoy the splash of colour, especially when the early evening sun glances off it.

We generally put the feeder up in early to mid-May, depending on the weather. Our first "hummer" sighting is often on the Victoria Day long weekend, perhaps because we are out puttering in the yard all weekend long. At any rate, this first meeting of the year is cause for celebration, as well as an excuse to let gardening chores wait while we admire the new arrivals.

The second week of June 1992 brought our first unusual hummingbird experience. After painting our front doors, I left one ajar for several hours to dry, while I worked in the garden. After checking that the paint had dried, I entered the house, and closed the door. As I walked toward the kitchen, I heard a noise and a rather agitated male hummingbird buzzed past me into the kitchen. The bold creature had somehow ventured through the inviting gap in the door.

After recovering from my shock, awe, and relief (shock at the unexpected house guest, awe at the opportunity to observe the beautiful bird up close - perched on my dining

room chandelier no less, and relief that none of our three cats had been indoors), I tried to decide on a course of action. The simplest solution appeared to be opening wide the double front doors to coax him toward freedom. Unfortunately, he continued to fly back and forth across the length of our great room without stopping to investigate the doorway in the middle. Attempts to confine his flight to the middle of the room by holding up sheets (I had enlisted my daughter Kate's assistance by this time) proved futile. Finally, in desperation, and having concluded that the bird must be nearing exhaustion, I decided to try a long shot. I took the feeder down from its branch, stepped inside the open doorway, and held the feeder in my outstretched hand. I hoped that the sight of the red feeder would induce him to come close enough to the doorway to realize his escape route. Although I had heard hummingbirds referred to as pugnacious, I had no idea how daring they could be. He flew over to investigate, seemed to scrutinize me carefully as he hovered slowly toward the feeder, then, after apparently reaching some conclusion about me, hovered closer until he gently poked my hand. Satisfied that I was no threat, or perhaps too hungry to care, he began to drink his fill, pausing periodically to observe me further. Finally, apparently noticing the outdoors beckoning to him, he made straight for a favourite perch on the nearest poplar tree, to rest. My daughter and I sat outside nearby to marvel at this wonderful episode with our favourite summer visitor. The experience would help prepare me for another unique occurrence later in the year.

Our summer progressed peacefully, if cooler than we would have desired. As in years past, we enjoyed the sight of the resident hum-

mingbird pair that attended our feeder and flower garden. We loved watching their aerial acrobatics, especially when the two seemed involved in a game of tag, or a dispute over domestic duties. We have grown quite accustomed to the sounds of these tiny birds as they travel about our yard.

In our corner of Manitoba it is not uncommon for our gardening season to be cut short by an early frost. Certainly we feel fortunate when we escape a frost until mid-September. In an average year, the hummingbirds usually move on by the first week in September. Because of the mild weather and absence of frost I left the hummingbird feeder up well into the month. Busier now with indoor pursuits, I had time to observe the feeder only occasionally. It seemed that each time I concluded that it was time to take it down, I would see a hummingbird enjoying a drink. I assumed that these were not "our" birds, but travellers on their way south. Observations of a bird at the feeder on 27 September and throughout the following week led to a decision to leave the feeder up indefinitely. This was uncharted territory for us, and we decided not to abruptly remove the bird(s) food source.

No further sightings are recorded on the calendar, probably because I was preoccupied with other matters. On 8 October, my calendar shows that the hummingbird was spotted at the feeder at 7:30 a. m.. After observing several aborted feeding attempts, I went to investigate, only to discover that the solution was frozen. I hurried inside to thaw out and warm up the solution, realizing that the bird must be badly in need of some energy. At that point we were still thinking that we were dealing

with some straggling migrants. The thought that one of "our" birds had somehow failed to head south with the rest seemed too outlandish.

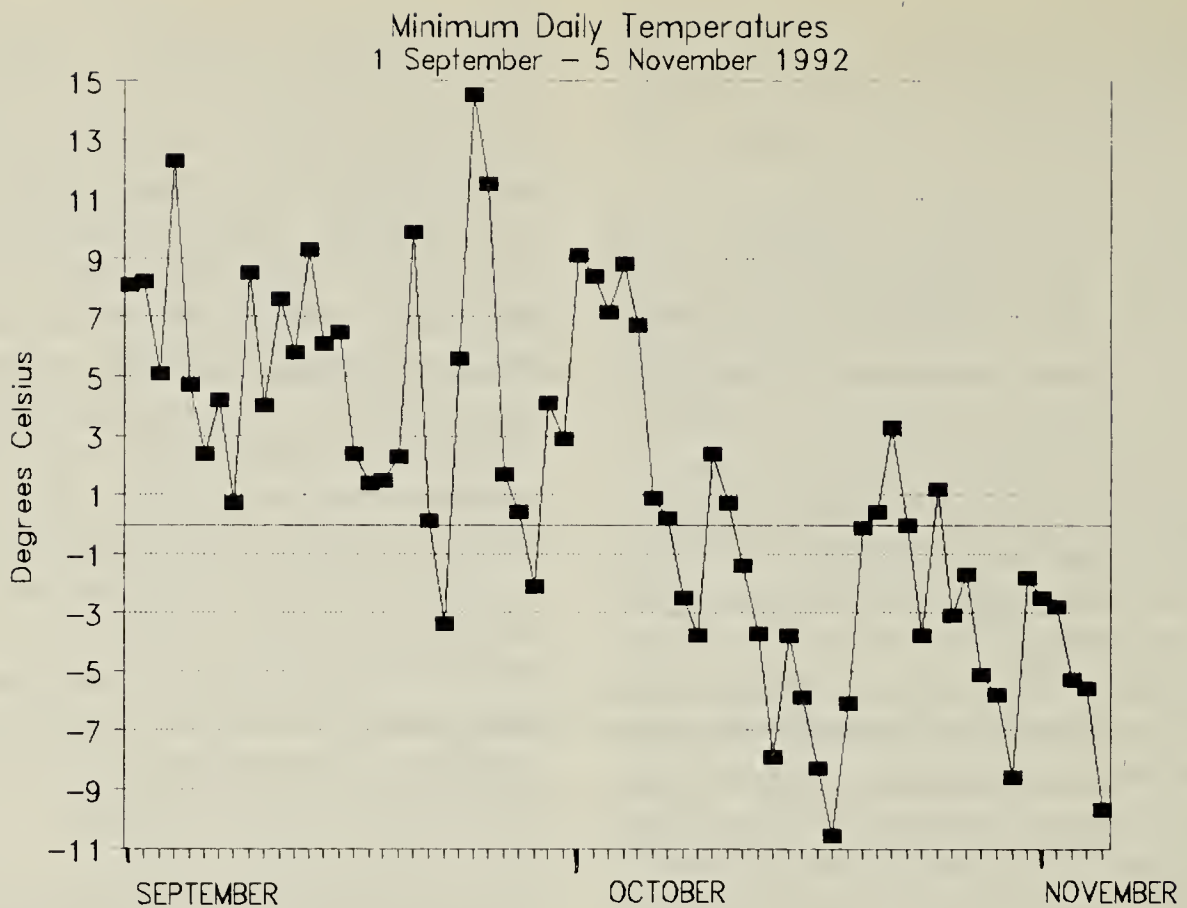
When our hardy little friend was still with us on Thanksgiving Day, our astonishment grew. I developed a routine of bringing the feeder in at night so as to avoid the necessity of thawing it out each morning. We increased the concentration of the solution, and substituted corn syrup for sugar. We began to check the feeder with a sense of dread each morning. If we didn't see our little friend, we wouldn't know it if had "come to its senses" and fled south, or succumbed overnight to the cold. Although I did not record daily or nighttime temperatures at the time, I have since obtained temperature data from Environment Canada, and I prepared a graph to illustrate just how cool it got on some occasions during this time period. My calendar notes indicate that we had our first snowfall on 13 October. We continued to observe the bird throughout October and into the first week of November. It certainly was bizarre to see our fluffed up "hummer" huddled on its perch on the poplar tree in the snow-covered yard, waiting for us to set out the feeder.

By this time of course we were desperate and felt somewhat responsible for the bird's predicament since we had continued to feed him/her. Back in late September it had seemed reasonable to leave the feeder up; now we regretted that decision. The first three days of November were quite cool; the forecast for the night of 4 November however, was even more ominous: -15° Celsius. Our bird could never survive that! Drastic action was called for, but what? In June I had learned that a hummingbird could be enticed indoors by curiosity; would hunger work as well? Since it seemed to be my only chance, I decided to throw energy conservation to the wind, and give it a try. I took the feeder down, and tied it to a ceiling-mounted light fixture just inside the

front doorway, then rounded up everything red that I could find: a towel, my husband's housecoat, my son's jacket. I fashioned a path of red on the ground from beneath the feeder's usual location across the 5 feet to the open double doors. I hoped this would lead my little friend to the feeder's new, warmer location. Over the next two hours, I alternated between my day's work at the computer, and the labour of love in our rapidly cooling great room. By spying around corners and observing from outside, I was able to determine that by the end of the first chilly hour the bird had found the feeder. Unfortunately, it would fly in for a drink, but was not interested in staying in the warmer (only somewhat by this time) house.

Not yet ready to give up, I grabbed pruning shears and gathered some branches which I set into a weighted bucket as a makeshift tree beside the feeder. Then I hid behind one of the double doors, determined to capture the bird on its next feeding sortie. Fortunately (the house was downright cold by this time) I didn't have long to wait. The bird flew to the feeder, had a long drink, then perched on my welcoming branches (why hadn't I thought of that three freezing hours ago?). I quickly closed the doors and breathed a short-lived sigh of relief, for at that moment one of our cats (supposedly locked in another part of the house) pounced on the poor startled bird. I immediately grabbed the cat, and quickly convinced him to give up the bird. Miraculously the bird escaped unharmed, though considerably rattled. Concluding that the hummingbird needed some quiet recovery time, I retired to another room, after first tossing all three cats outside.

Now that I had managed to lure the hummingbird into the house, the question became WHAT NOW?! I knew I couldn't allow the bird its freedom in the house because of the threat our cats posed. But what to keep it in? How would I catch it? I



Minimum daily temperatures at Steinbach, Manitoba, 1 September - 5 November 1992. Data provided by Environment Canada.

decided that it was probably best to capture it before it had completely recovered from the ordeal with the cat. In the end, I was able to gently grab it and place it in a small plastic open mesh container that I keep on hand for birds recovering from occasional collisions with our picture windows. Later I transferred it to a tall open mesh plastic laundry hamper with a lid, after placing newspaper on the bottom, positioning a branch inside for perching, and tying the feeder to the lid. The transfer to the makeshift cage went smoothly, and the bird was left to rest in its new home, while I contemplated its future.

A household with cats is no place for a bird, even if it is caged. The other two possibilities which occurred to me were the Winnipeg Zoo, and the Manitoba Wildlife Rehabilitation Organization (MWRO). Although I was vaguely familiar with the MWRO's work, I didn't know if

they would be prepared to come to the rescue of "my hummer." It was worth the try, so I proceeded to leave what, in retrospect, must have been a very confusing message on their answering machine. Later that afternoon I received a call from an MWRO volunteer who arranged transportation for the bird to Winnipeg, where it would be cared for by MWRO rehabilitation volunteer, Rhonda O'Grady. As I write this, the bird (subsequently determined to be a young female) is being cared for by a second MWRO volunteer. With the help of the MWRO and a bit more luck, the bird will continue to thrive in captivity until time for her release in spring.

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