

HUMMINGBIRD SEQUEL

RHONDA O'GRADY, 180 Alcrest Drive, Winnipeg, Manitoba. R3R 0Y1

It was 5 November 1992 when I received a Ruby-throated Hummingbird in a mesh clothes hamper, a strange guest for that time of year. Instead of migrating south, it had remained at a backyard feeder until it was lured indoors by Mrs. Judy Richardson (see previous article). Doubtless it would have starved or succumbed to cold if the feeder had not been available.

As a volunteer rehabilitator with the Manitoba Wildlife Rehabilitation Organization (MWRO), the offer to care for a hummingbird over winter was a challenge I readily accepted. The chances of its survival were questioned by all who knew of its predicament. Some thought that the only way to keep it alive was to fly it to Mexico or to release it into a greenhouse. Since we could not do either, I improvised. The overwhelmingly negative attitudes of my friends caused me to question the bird's survival daily, but, after I had researched hummingbird diets and habits, I felt confident in my endeavour.

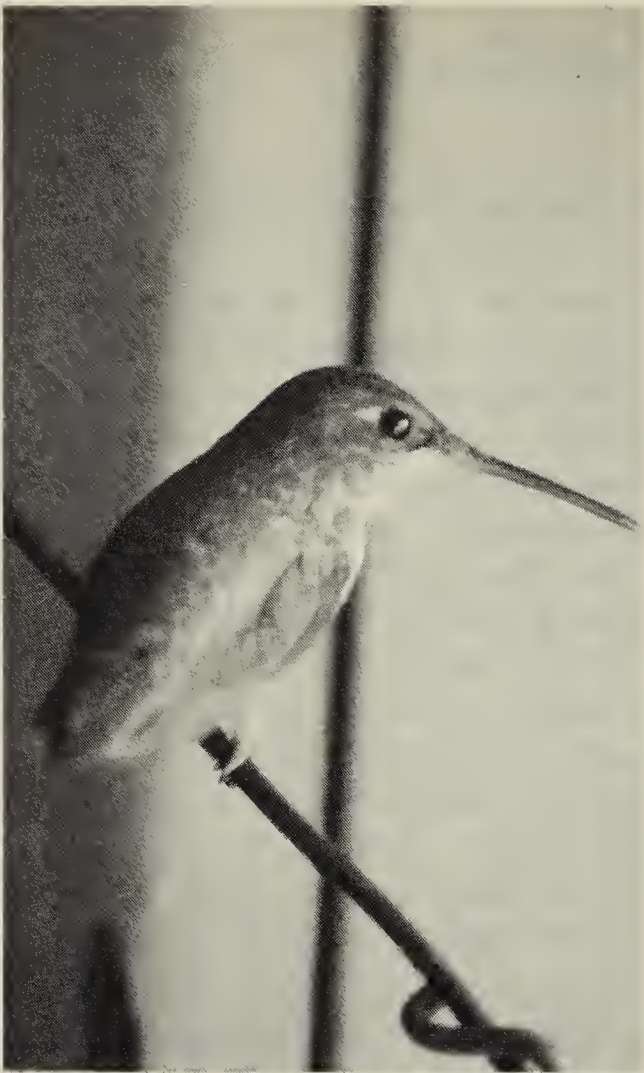
The hummingbird was thought at first to be a juvenile male because it had what appeared to be red feathers under its bill. However, this turned out to be food colouring from Mrs. Richardson's feeders; as soon as it came off I realized the bird was a juvenile female.

To give the bird the illusion of a tropical habitat, I put her in an empty room with an east-facing window with five flowering tropical plants nearby and red osier dogwood

branches in a ceramic pot for perches. Initially, I fed the bird fruit cocktail juice and sugar water out of a dish. The hummingbird found it immediately and seemed to enjoy this imaginative concoction. This gave me time to find a more nourishing recipe and to purchase, beg, and borrow feeders. I hung three hummingbird feeders around the room and periodically changed their locations to add variety to the bird's routine flight patterns. I also played "Solitudes" tapes every so often which appeared to calm the bird.

The recipe I found most beneficial was right out of the MWRO manual: one cup of distilled water, four tablespoons of corn syrup, and one tablespoon of baby fruit pabulum, all of which were boiled together. I received Nutri Cal (high calorie supplement) from the MWRO Medical Coordinator, Janice McCarthy, and added it to the mixture when it was still warm. When the mixture was at room temperature I added one teaspoon of protein powder and a few drops of commercial bird vitamins. I would then pour about one-quarter cup of this "nectar" into two of my feeders, putting water and commercial nectar into the other. I would store enough food for three days in the fridge, since this was the suggested length of time which this nectar could remain free of a harmful fungus which can kill a captive hummingbird. In order to prevent the growth of this fungus I also had to sterilize and refill all the feeders every night - even if I was dead tired.

Fruit flies were one of the most



Juvenile female Ruby-throated Hummingbird

Rhonda O'Grady

important sources of nutrients for the hummingbird. For natural protein, 500 fruit flies were provided daily (when they were available). I first collected flies from friends who were having problems with them around their homes and let them loose with the bird. This, however, did not come near to the volume of flies needed, for she could easily catch and eat 500 a day. She would catch the flies by darting after them as they flew past and snapping them up with her bill or by licking them off branches. She was like a fruit fly vacuum, sucking up all in her path. At one point I was breeding fruit flies from cultures, leaving the room filled with many hundreds. In one day the flies would be gone and since I never had a problem with fruit flies anywhere else in my home, I knew the bird was devouring them. Finally, I put the flies in a large glass jar with some decay-

ing fruit, thereby providing the bird with a constant supply of flies instead of a feast and famine routine. The hummingbird, however, had her own ideas and was soon flying straight down into the jar, catching the flies right there or scaring them out and catching them in the room. It was strange to hear a hummingbird's beating wings echoing inside a pickle jar. Even more puzzling was when I could not see any flies in the jar, but the hummingbird would still go inside the jar and feed on the flies. This made me question whether she used other senses for catching flies or had amazing eyesight. I believe that without the flies the bird would have been bored sick and possibly would not have survived its stay at my home.

A recent publication in an ornithological journal emphasizes that much remains to be learned about the extent to which hummingbirds feed on insects and other arthropods. The authors state: "It appears that insect feeding by hummingbirds is not incidental or opportunistic but probably occurs regularly in many species.... Foraging for arthropods by hummingbirds may be in response to abundant insects or may be a necessary alternative during nectar shortages.... Whatever the reason for arthropod foraging by hummingbirds it appears more widely spread than previously considered."¹

The hummingbird had a perch which she always returned to after feeding and another where she cleaned her bill. Like a chef sharpening a knife she scraped her bill back and forth first on one side of a branch and then the other. She was constantly preening and ruffling her feathers. After visiting a feeder she would return to her perch and stick out her translucent tongue several



Makeshift tropical forest for wintering hummingbird.

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times in rapid succession. At night, if the lights were off and the room cooled down, she would become torpid. This was when I could clean and work around her without disturbing her. If the lights were turned on outside the room when she was not quite asleep she would wake up and fly towards the light. In the dark she could not see at all and would bump into walls and then retire to the floor. Once, when the bird escaped into another room, I discovered that I could guide her to her room using only the light of a flashlight.

This little bird had incredible energy and seemed content in her artificial quarters. No matter how often she saw me, she never showed any sign of affection; she just wanted me out of her territory. I never handled her or tried in any way to make her bond to me. As the months went by she grew stronger and more colourful as she acquired her adult plumage, but she remained wild, as I had

hoped. In February when it came time to pass her over to MWRO volunteers Terry and Randy Langelier, who were completing a greenhouse into which the bird could be released for the rest of the winter, I felt a great loss. Even though we kept our distance, I cherished the little bird. To me, she was a teacher of life, patience, nature, and love. I am glad I helped my little teacher, and I hope others will enjoy sharing my experience. I have kept in close touch with the Langeliers and I hear the hummingbird is doing great. She spends her time defending her territory from the Langelier's pet parrot and chasing fruit flies. In June we shall get together to release the bird back into the wild, possibly with a tiny band around her leg so we will know it is her if she decides to vacation in Winnipeg for another winter.

1. CHAVEZ-RAMIREZ, F. and M. DOWD. 1992. Arthropod feeding by two Dominican hummingbird species. *Wils. Bull.* 104:743-747.