

HUMMINGBIRD NOTES
By Mabel Gillespie

During a few brief winter seasons I have been able to engage in a study of a presumably rather stable wintering population on a dairy ranch some ten miles south of San Luis Obispo, California. The mother of the rancher lives in a bungalow on a steep slope above the barns and ponds beyond which were grassy slopes where the cattle grazed. Mrs M. always had quantities of bird feed on the terrace by her house which was shaded by live oaks and an immense Monterey pine. Counting the ducks on the ponds, the red-winged blackbirds and swallows which never came quite to the terrace, turkey vultures and red-tailed hawks soaring over the pastures, I have counted nearly fifty species of birds on or about the terrace.

I had been eager to try banding there, but since it would be necessary to use nets I had been hesitant about asking permission to use them. Finally, however, Mr. M. herself urged me to undertake the project, and in 1966 I operated three nets five times for periods varying from four to six hours. It has been possible to continue this study in 1967, 1968, and 1970. The results have seemed worthwhile, but it is not an over-all summary that I now wish to present, but an incident involving hummingbirds. And before I present my experiences with two species of these little jewels, I will quote a bit from C. Brooke Worth's A Naturalist in Trinidad which was reviewed in this publication recently.

Dr. Worth wrote: "We had to spend part of our time extricating hummingbirds from net meshes. Sometimes they gave us more trouble than larger birds, owing to their lodging halfway through a mesh that could have engaged no more than a head or leg of a tanager." The hummers were marked by snipping half an inch from the outermost primary feather on the right side, then the next wing primary in a following bird, and so on until starting on the left side.

"Each ground net set up...as I expanded my program, initially caught more hummingbirds than later on. And it was several months after I began to wing clip them before a single idiot Hairy Hermit returned to a net. By that time I had marked thirty-six of these creatures distributed among six species. Yet the clearing was still full of hummingbirds, traversing it like arrows or stopping to feed on helicornias a few feet from my swivel chair on the gallery. Many times their trajectories took them straight toward a net. Now, however, they stopped short of it, hovering in stationary contemplation. With their ability to fly up, down, sideways and backwards, they simply maneuvered until they topped the net and were off like darts in their original directions. If they had learned about the nets in one lesson, weren't they 'smarter' than other birds?...Obviously if I couldn't catch them, I could not aver that they were wing-clipped. But how else explain their behavioral change?"

Among other devices for attracting birds at the dairy ranch, Mrs. M. had several hummingbird feeders hanging from the roof or from trees over the terrace. There were both Anna's and Allen's hummingbirds wintering in the area. I had no sooner set up the nets than the tiny mites began flying into them. I was appalled. I had no means of tagging them, and I visioned the nuisance of having constantly to disentangle them.

In the first place it was very easy to remove them from the mesh. In this respect my experience differed from Dr. Worth's. He claimed that they were difficult to extricate. Perhaps I rescued them more quickly, or the mesh in my nets may have been more closely woven. My dismay soon turned to delight in holding such a jeweled mite, turning it this way and that to catch the light so that it sparkled like the emeralds and rubies in a brooch. Dr. Worth wrote that a hummingbird in the hand "provides unsurpassable moments." Altogether, I must have extricated a dozen of the little beauties during the first day of banding.

Two weeks passed before I set up the nets on and about the terrace for a second period of banding. The hummingbirds were coming to and going from the feeders as before. I watched one set its flight directly toward a net, and then stop short. It hovered stationary in mid air for a second, and then shot directly up and over the net. Again and again I watched this maneuver. And during the following three weeks when I spent three more days of banding at the ranch the hummingbirds continued to avoid the nets. I may have caught one or two after the first day, and they might have been individuals that had not previously encountered a net. But time after time a hummer would fly directly toward a net, stop short just in time to avoid being captured, and then bound up and over the net and continue in its original direction of flight.

Dr. Worth wants to avoid anthropomorphic analysis of such behavior, but feels nevertheless that the hummingbirds were "smarter" than other species. If their actions were due entirely to keen vision they would have avoided the nets in the first place. In my experience often a week or ten days might have elapsed between netting operations. Yet the hummingbirds still remembered and avoided the nets.

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