

Off the Wall

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Feeding Nature's "Wild Kids" - Hummingbirds may have not made it into the plays of Shakespeare or into the masterpieces of European art, but they were seen as gods by many and we are fortunate to have them here year round.

Years ago, I was living in the Bay Islands of Honduras, where one of my art contracts landed me at a resort with an amazingly wonderful cook and a garden full of hummingbirds. Clara didn't just cook for resort guests, she cooked for her "wild kids";

Each evening, while tidying up the kitchen, Clara would cook up a huge pot of fresh rainwater with five pounds of sugar stirred in, bring it to a good rolling boil for five minutes or so, then turn off the gas burner, put the lid on the pot and let it sit overnight to cool. The next morning at dawn I would help her collect two galvanized washtubs full of empty hummingbird feeders from the trees around the resort grounds. We collected empty bottles of all shapes and sizes, from rum bottles to hot sauce bottles, all fitted with rubber corks and feeder tubes—Clara's version of recycling. We would wash them with a baby bottle brush under the garden hose then sit at the picnic table with a ladle, funnel and a the pot full of cool sugar water to refill more than 50 bottles with "hummingbird juice." Yes, it was a chore, but one we both enjoyed, and I was up at that hour anyway.

Even the most "I-don't-care-about-wildlife" sort of guest staying at the resort always commented on how pleasant it was to relax in such a pretty garden and see so many birds that they did not see at home. One day a young tourist of six named Anna was sitting on the porch of her cabin watching the sun come up over the sea when Clara and I showed up and quietly began collecting bottles. Of course Anna asked us what we were doing (which was exactly how Clara had roped me in). Clara responded that she was feeding her "wild kids" (one of which, incidentally, was a five-foot Caribbean Iguana named Jack that lived under the kitchen porch and ate canned dog food and fried chicken… but that's another story).

Anna happily helped gather and wash the bottles under the garden tap, as hummingbirds by the hundreds buzzed past our ears like small fighter jets in search of their missing juice bottles. By the time we sat down at the table they were swarming around the big kitchen pot and clean bottles, familiar with the daily routine. At this point, Anna's dad, wondering where his daughter had disappeared to at this hour, stuck his head out of their cabin door. Anna urgently motioned him over. He sat down beside her on the bench as Clara handed her a rum bottle and funnel to hold and ladled in the nectar.

Just as Clara began to pour, a brilliant, iridescent blue and green hummingbird, absorbed in the thought of stealing a sip of nectar straight from the ladle, delicately perched on Anna's hand. Anna froze with a frightened look, her lip started to tremble and her eyes got big, filling with tears. Her dad quickly said, "Oh, honey they won't bite." She whispered, "I know dad, this is just the coolest thing I've ever done in my life!" He chuckled with relief and said, "And to think of all that money I spent at Disneyland. I could have just bought you a hummingbird feeder." She smiled. The bird was still perched on her hand, as she looked sideways at her father and said, "Dozens!" Which made Clara go into peels of shrill laughter; she had another hummingbird lover on her hands.

Anna helped us "feed the wild kids" each morning for the rest of their stay. Her father thanked us the morning they left (after the feeders were filled with Anna's help, of course), saying it was the highlight of their holiday, and one none of them would forget.

There is nothing really unusual about an attractive Caribbean resort with a stunning view and wonderful people, but this place had that special touch of something magical—a joy and passion that money just can't buy. I have no doubts Clara is still "feeding her wild kids" and that Anna has many, many hummingbirds in her garden.

Hummingbirds through history

As amazing as hummingbirds are, you won't find a single one in Renaissance art or literature before the voyages of Columbus and the Spanish explorers. Shelley and Keats go on and on about nightingales and larks; imagine how their work may have changed if they had had these brilliant little jewels flitting about their gardens.

Hummingbirds are only found in North, Central and South America and the nearby islands. The old European masters missed out, but amazing artwork honouring hummingbirds was created in the drawings, paintings and the hieroglyphs of the indigenous people of the Americas. To the Aztec, Maya and Taino (Arawak) cultures, the hummingbird represented rebirth and occasionally the Rain God. The Mayans and Aztecs believed that a hummingbird died in the dry season and was reborn when the rains came. And true to form, they didn't admire the hummingbird for its charming diminutive size or iridescent feathers; instead, they saw a fierce warrior with a blade-like beak, willing to battle creatures many times its size.

There is also evidence that the Mayans believed the hummingbird carried the spirit of a fallen warrior. In North American Indian art, hummingbirds were believed to follow the sun across the sky, possibly marking the solstice. The Hopi believed it was the bringer of rain and honoured it as a sacred Kachina. Hummingbird images have been found on zemis, carvings and talismans of the Tainos. The zemis were usually carved from wood or stone, represented their gods of nature and were used by the shaman to bring good fortune and blessings.

If you happen to find yourself flying over the high tablelands near the small town of Nazca, Peru, look down and you will see two stylistic line drawings of hummingbirds. These drawings were created by an agricultural society between 400 BC to 800 AD and measure 450 and 475 feet in length. They were drawn across the plateau with the purpose of being viewed from the heavens and were made by scraping away the thin dark surface soil to expose the light-coloured clay beneath. We call the creators the Nazca, but truly we know little about them, not even what they called themselves. Nor do we know the meanings of these large drawings, some of which were clearly inspired by the little hummingbird. What we do know is that they contain lines marking the points of the rising and setting sun of the summer solstice and other celestial events. These unique bird drawings can still be seen from a small plane. Unfortunately, left unprotected, off-road traffic is rapidly destroying these delicate and ancient works of art.

In your own garden

If you would like to see more of these flying jewels in your garden, the simplest way is to invite them in to a banquet of the foods they love: red salvia, bottlebrush, coral plants, red ginger and torch ginger, sage, shrimp plants, century plants, trumpet creepers, cape honeysuckle, morning glory, lantana, red impatiens, flamboyant trees, papaya, banana, heliconia, bird of paradise and hibiscus, just to name a few. Think red, orange, trumpet, sweet and so forth; however, once there, they will enjoy other flowers of all colours, too. It is best to plant a variety of their favourite flowers that will bridge the seasons. And avoid insecticides. Twenty-five per cent of their diet is made up of insects and spiders, so why not let them take care of the pests in your garden?

Now add a shallow birdbath, hang it in the shade of a tree or at the edge of the patio (a safe distance away from other animals), refilled with fresh water daily and you have a recipe for success. You will be rewarded with the handsome bonus of attracting other charming insect-eating and nectar birds like and finches and the entertaining bananaquits (banana-keets) into the garden.

Next month I'll share more interesting hummer facts. And if you want to attract even more birds to your garden, I'll provide information on the best types of feeders. In the meantime, plant a packet or two of seeds like red salvia and pick up a couple of plants at the local nursery that are already in bloom like a bottlebrush plant and a trumpet vine and get your birdbath out there for them to enjoy. In this heat they will love the cool, fresh water and thank you for it.

In a week or two you will be hooked and you'll want a good bird identification book. My two favorites for the VI are *Birds of the West Indies* and *A Guide to the Birds of Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands*, both by Herbert Raffaele and published by Princeton University Press.

As I write this, an Antillean crested hummingbird and a green-throated carib are enjoying the cape honeysuckle outside my studio window. Nature's Little Secrets in the BVI are beautiful.