

# A BIRD IN THE HAND

*A surprise encounter with a hummingbird*

BY JAY FELDMAN

I'VE ALWAYS had the desire to touch wild creatures. The image of Francis of Assisi, birds perched on his shoulders and beasts seated at his feet, holds a deep fascination for me. My mind also turns time and again to an account of a remarkable incident that the naturalist Vinson Brown witnessed in the heart of a Panamanian jungle. Brown was traveling with a native Guaymí youth. One morning he awoke at dawn to find his guide perched on a rock below a waterfall, singing a song so haunting and powerful that the birds drew near and other animals also came closer.

On the few occasions when I've touched a wild animal, I've always felt a tremendous soaring of spirit. But the most exhilarating experience of all was the time I held a hummingbird and, for a brief moment, touched my own wildness.

To me, hummingbirds—the lilliputians of the bird world—have always represented the ineffable mystery, beauty, and freedom of the wild. Nothing is more mesmerizing than watching a hummer as it hovers briefly at a flower, its fifty wingbeats per second creating a barely visible blur of afterimages, then zips away—often backward—at a breathtaking speed.

When I lived on the West Coast near

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PHOTOGRAPH: HAROLD EDGERTON, 1948



Mendocino in the early '70s, I had the good fortune to observe quite a bit of hummingbird activity. Depending on the time of year, we had four different species—Anna's, Allen's, black-chinned, and rufous—nesting or migrating through. In the spring the male hummers would woo the less brightly colored females with a spectacular, looping-and-diving courtship display. Some species, I discovered, would describe a low, broad arc, while others followed the looping pattern with a heart-stopping climb and dive—one hundred feet in the case of Anna's and Allen's, whose plummets can reach a top speed of sixty miles per hour. The Anna's dive takes him directly over the object of his desire—at which point he suddenly fans his tail

feathers to brake his descent, causing an explosive rush of sound, then flies straight into the sun, making his iridescent bib appear to burst into flames. One other piece of information I can't resist mentioning: male rufous hummingbirds reportedly beat their wings a mind-boggling *two hundred times per second* during their courtship flights!

Many spring afternoons—the displays seemed to peak in the afternoon—I sat and watched the males put on their show, never tiring of this command-performance aerial circus.

One afternoon during the height of mating season, I was sitting in my house reading. I'd left the door open to let in the welcome, warm spring air. Suddenly, my attention was captured by the unmistakable buzz-saw whirring of hummingbird wings, sounding very close. I looked up to see a male Anna's hummingbird hovering about six feet away. He saw me, too, and in a panicky attempt to escape, flew toward the nearest source of light—a four-by-four-foot picture window. The disoriented Anna's smacked into the glass and fell to the bookshelf below.

I quickly moved to the window to look for the bird. To my dismay, I couldn't find him anywhere on the surface of the shelf. I began a systematic search and, after a few minutes, located him—when he fell, his inch-and-a-half-long bill had become pinned in the pages of *Webster's Unabridged Dictionary*. He was hanging there limply, eyes open but glazed.

Ever so carefully, I disengaged his

beak from between the pages and closed my hand around his fragile body. Holding him gently but firmly—although he seemed quite stunned, I wanted to be sure that if he did revive quickly, he wouldn't be able to fly out of my hand inside the house—I went into the garden.

Once outside, I opened my hand and studied the dazed living jewel lying in my palm, which was sweating by now. He was incredibly beautiful—iridescent-red head and bib, white throat, iridescent-green breast and back. I stroked his limp body and whistled softly to him. Except for an occasional blink of his eyes, he was as still as stone.

He lay there for some time, tiny heartbeat in my hand, as I waited for him to revive, knowing with bitter-sweet certainty that when he did, he would fly away.

Finally, he blinked several times, stirred, and took flight, landing on a branch some ten feet away. I looked down at my hand—two miniscule green breast feathers were stuck there by perspiration. I was overcome with gratitude and went inside to put the feathers in a safe place.

Then I was struck by an inspiration. Hummingbirds, I knew, were attracted to bright colors—that's how they find the flowers from which they gain their nourishment. I put on a kimono made of brightly colored Guatemalan fabric and went back outside.

My friend was still sitting on the branch where he had alighted. I resumed my whistling and, moving as slowly as I could, approached him. About two feet away, I stopped. We looked at each other. He cocked his head a bit to the side to get a better view of me. My mind raced: would it be worth the risk of trying to touch him again and possibly frighten him away? Yes. I slowly raised my arm toward him; he made no move to flee. Continuing to whistle softly, I reached out and stroked his breast.

Time froze, and we melted together in an eternal moment. Inside me, no conflict, no thoughts, no enemies. Tranquility. Uncommon stillness.

Finally, with a supreme effort of will, I lowered my arm and wrenched myself away. I turned and, forcing myself not to look back, went inside. I took out my/his breast feathers and looked at them, wondering if Saint Francis ever touched a hummingbird. 