

Young Birder of the Year Contest

Young Birder education has long been a goal of the American Birding Association. As an extension of that goal, the ABA/Leica Young Birder of the Year (YBY) Competition made its debut as an ABA education program with a year-long contest in 1997.

The YBY Competition was begun with a firm commitment from the ABA to enhance development of good field skills in young birders, emphasizing record-keeping, illustration, and writing skills that they would carry with them throughout their birding lives. The contest was conceived of as an avenue to inspire young birders and to create incentives for them to develop those skills, and the generous sponsorship by Leica Sport Optics provided the means.

Over the years the competition has evolved. Currently, it runs from April through October of each year, and today's participants can customize the contest to reflect their own educational needs and ornithological interests. The YBY Competition for 2004 is separated into two age categories and includes four modules: Field Notebook, Writing, Illustration, and Photography. Contestants can choose one or all of the modules and can concentrate on those aspects of birding that they find most compelling.

*At only 16 years of age, **Claire Curry** is already one of our most promising young birders. She began competing in the YBY Contest with the 1999–2000 competition and won First Place in the 10–12 age category. Claire has also won First Place in the Essay Module (2000); Grand Prize in the 10–13 age category and First Place in the Illustration and Essay Modules (2001); First Place in the Essay Module 14–18 age category (2002); and Second Place in the Essay Module 14–18 age category (2003).*

*The three other excellent young writers to win in the Essay Module for the YBY 2003 Competition were: **Lauren Thead** (Age 14–18 Category), **Josiah Malueg** (Age 10–13 Category), and **Davie Rolnick** (Age 10–13 Category). Congratulations to these inspiring young birders for their dedication to birding and outstanding writing.*

For more information about the Young Birder of the Year Contest or any of our other education programs, please contact the ABA at 800-850-2473 x237.

— Lori L. Fujimoto, ABA Education Manager

A Birding Essay: Stubs

On a Saturday afternoon in mid-August an odd-looking hummingbird caught my mom's attention.

Upon closer inspection we discovered that the female hummingbird (either Black-chinned or Ruby-throated) was injured; its left foot was unused. Its beak also looked deformed, with portions of both halves of the beak gone. We thought this was unusual, but we didn't think much more about it at the time. We only snapped a few photos of the

bird and noted that it visited the feeders two other times in the day.

The next afternoon, while I sat on the front porch eating chocolate ice cream, the injured hummingbird landed nearby. I watched it and at the same time tried to keep my ice cream cone from dripping. I moved a little too much in this attempt and the hummer flew off to a nearby oak tree. A little while later it returned, and this time I sat still long enough for the hummer to stay. My dog wandered by, though, and the hummingbird flew away again.

For the following three days, Stubs (as Mom dubbed her) visited the feeder regularly. Stubs would settle onto a feeder and sit easily, but it

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Photograph by © Claire Curry.

took a bit more effort for her to get a drink. She beat her wings to balance as she stuck her bill into the feeder holes.

Stubs was then absent for two days, but we spotted her again on August 23. We were terribly disappointed to see that she was in worse condition. The end of her beak had broken off and was dangling at an angle from the remaining length of the bill. Her tongue didn't go completely back into the bill, either. We watched her struggle to stick her tongue into the feeder holes, and both Mom and I predicted that poor Stubs wasn't going to last much longer.

This same day, a male Ruby-throated Hummingbird arrived at the feeders. He took possession of one feeder and vigorously chased off all competitors. We were astonished when we saw the Ruby-throat pinning Stubs to the ground! We did not know if they were fighting, mating, or what, but I speculated in my notes, "Perhaps the Ruby-throat was out for blood." I did see Stubs one more time that day, at a feeder that was out of the male Ruby-throat's view.

The next day, Stubs's beak was even more bent-up than before. She couldn't seem to manage her tongue without a whole beak to guide it. We decided to fill up the feeders to the brim so it would be easier for her to get to the sugar water. Then we removed the lid from one feeder, so that the small holes would not be a problem. I set the lid on the front-porch swing, but this puzzled the hummers greatly. So, I put the lid back on the feeder before Stubs even came back. Next I tried tipping the lid so that it was on the feeder, but there was a big space between the dish and the lid. Not a single hummingbird figured this out, either. All of them, including our pathetic Stubs, just sat on the lid and ignored the gaping space. About twenty minutes after the experiments with the lid, Stubs got some sugar water without any help from us.

Despite her injuries, Stubs was not subdued. She sat on the front-porch-swing rope again and defended the porch and feeder from all passing hummers. I watched and sketched her for around an hour or so. She was a sad sight with her mangled



Field sketch by © Claire Curry.



Photograph by © Claire Curry.

beak, but still a fine example of hummingbird fierceness.

That evening Stubs visited one of the feeders, and we noticed that the dangling tip of her bill had broken off. Her tongue constantly was out, whether she was drinking or not. It was also a little bent-up, likely from attempts to get it through the feeder holes. It seemed that she was figuring out how to maneuver her beakless tongue-tip into the feeder by hovering away from the hole as she flicked out her tongue. It looked like it worked a lot better than trying to cram her tongue and now-blunt beak all at once into the narrow hole.

Still as mean as ever, Stubs stopped by the feeder the next morning. Her tongue was still looking rather battered, and she had her feathers fluffed up more than the other hummingbirds. As the day progressed, though, her plumage smoothed down like that of the other hummingbirds.

During the following four days, Stubs continued to

visit the feeders at least once a day. She seemed to get the hang of putting her tongue into the feeders, without a beak to direct its course. Mom and I speculated on how Stubs came to damage her beak and foot in the first place. Perhaps a predator caught her unaware on her nest, or maybe she had a hard collision with a window. Or, her beak might have been deformed to begin with, and subsequently became damaged even more. Another of our theories was that she got into a really tough fight with another hummingbird. While watching other hummers, we occasionally hear their beaks clicking like little sword-fighters, so we wondered if Stubs simply got hammered in one of the many hummingbird battles.

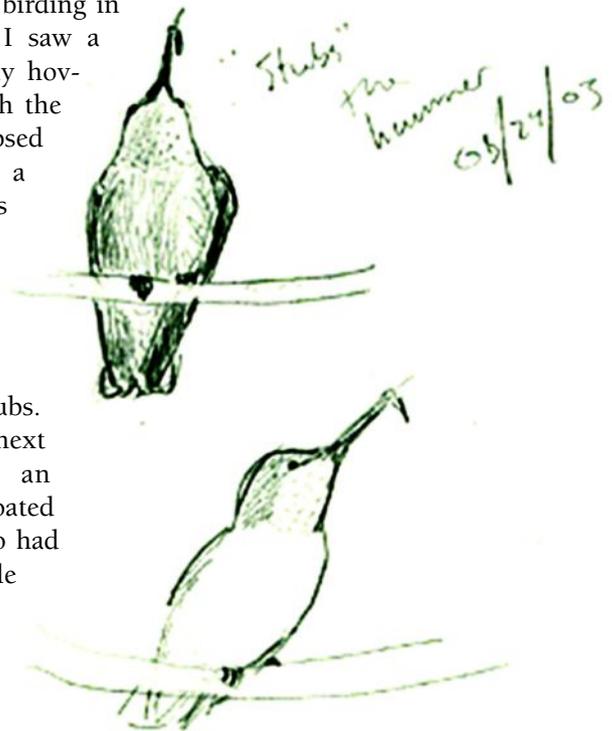
Two weeks after we first saw Stubs at the feeders, we were birding in the woods. Mom and I saw a hummingbird alternately hovering and flying through the underbrush. I just glimpsed the bird, but Mom got a better look at it. It was Stubs! This was the first time we had ever seen Stubs away from the yard.

September third was the next time we saw Stubs. She also showed up the next evening, bombarding an outnumbered Ruby-throated Hummingbird, who also had two or three other female hummingbirds competing for use of the feeder. Despite our previous dire predictions, Stubs seemed to be thriving!

We didn't see Stubs for a day after that, which was only half of her previous two-day absence. For some reason, though, we thought that Stubs had migrated or maybe gone up to the big flower garden in the sky. So, we were quite thrilled when good ole Stubs zoomed by the front porch!

As Stubs perched in a cottonwood, I noticed that her plumage wasn't as neat as that of another hummingbird in the same tree. My guess was that she was having a difficult time preening with her blunted bill. Also, with her injured foot, she probably couldn't manage to spare a foot to scratch herself. Despite her slightly untidy state, we were glad to see our tenacious little friend. As we said when Stubs zipped by the front porch, "Yay! She's still alive!"

Note: This essay previously appeared in the author's column, "Birds and Beyond", in the *Wise County Messenger*.



Field sketch by © Claire Curry.

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