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# Mid-Atlantic Region

## MARSHALL ILIFF

John Bjerke wrote that this was “a good season for Redheads and American Tree Sparrows and a really bad one for roofs.” The winter of 1995–1996 was indeed exceptional, with the several snowstorms punctuated by the biggest storm to hit the Region in more than a decade. “The Blizzard of ‘96” hit January 7 and blanketed the Region with up to two feet of snow. A couple of other snowstorms followed in the next week. Overall temperatures were below average in January and precipitation was double what was expected.

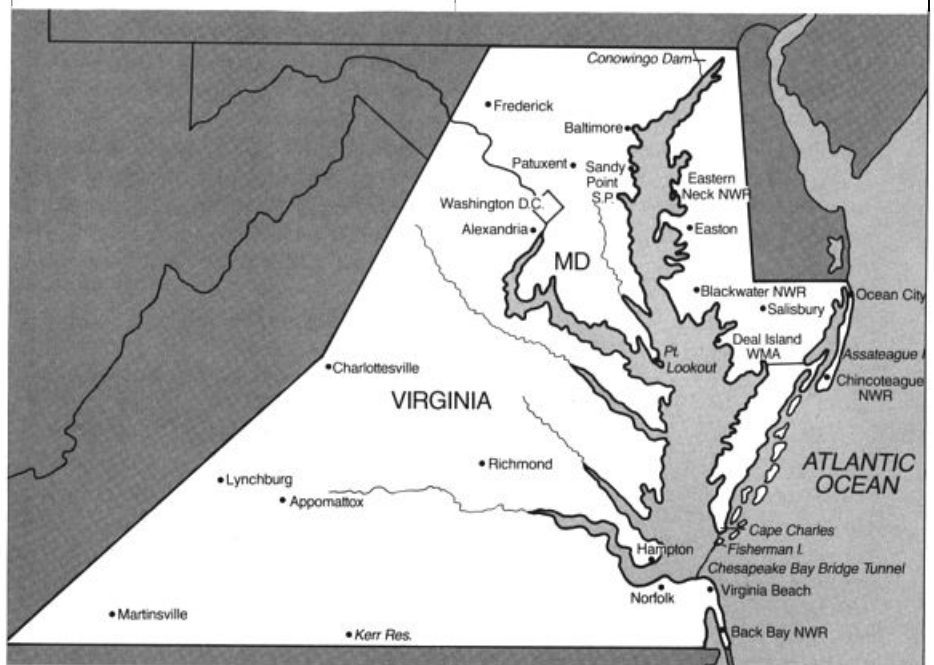
All the snow and ice had profound effects on birds. All freshwater and much of the brackish water, including much of the Bay, was frozen for a period from mid-January to February. The blanket of snow and ice drove small landbirds (and, with them, hawks) to feeders, and field birds to plowed roadsides. Everyone reported high feeder activity during and after the storms. In addition, there were small-scale invasions and phenomenal counts of several species, and several rarities that complemented the banner year for feeder birds.

Abbreviations: Assat. (*Assateague Island National Seashore*); Bay (*Chesapeake Bay*);

Black. (*Blackwater N.W.R.*); C.B.B.T. (*Chesapeake Bay Bridge-Tunnel*); Chinc. (*Chincoteague N.W.R.*); D.C. (*District of Columbia*); Deal (*Deal I. Wildlife Management Area*); E.N.N.W.R. (*Eastern Neck N.W.R.*); p.a. (*pending acceptance by the local records committee*); P.R.N.A.S. (*Patuxent R. Naval Air Station*).

## Loons to Waterfowl

Unusual gatherings of Red-throated Loons included flocks of 400 at Bethel Pt., *Mathews*, Dec. 29 (JBB) and Pt. Lookout, *Saint Mary's*, Dec. 31 (JLS), while two at Beaverdam Res., *Loudoun*, Dec. 2 (DA) and a single bird at Kerr Res., *Mecklenburg*, Dec. 6–17 (BP, BPe) were rare inland sightings. Red-necked Grebes were present in better-than-average numbers, probably being frozen out of more northerly climes. The 4 reports in December were spread throughout the state, while the 20 other reports were almost entirely restricted to open water on the coast and in the lower Bay (v.o.). Northern Gannets continued in the upper Bay through late December (v.o.) and arrived again Feb. 25 (MC), with only one report in January (DL). A high count of 1000 was made on the Feb. 10 pelagic off Virginia Beach (DA). Brown Pelicans put on perhaps their best winter showing, with reports of one from Cape Charles, *Northampton*, Dec. 30 (HTA), five at Virginia Beach Feb. 9 (JFI), one at Ocean City, *Worcester* (JBC, D&CB), six at the C.B.B.T., Feb. 11, and one at Pt. Lookout Feb. 25 (B&WW). The Hopewell CBC had 449 Double-crested Cormorants Dec. 16 (*vide* LR), an excellent count for this



uncommon winterer. Reports of s. herons were predictably scarce considering the harsh weather, but an ad. Black-crowned Night-Heron Jan. 20 at Lawyers, *Campbell*, represented perhaps only the 2nd winter record for the Virginia Piedmont (J&TD).

Good Tundra Swan numbers were reported, certainly due in part to the birds being frozen out of coves and creeks and feeding in farm fields. Two Trumpeter Swans Feb. 17–21 at Black Hills Res., *Montgomery* (†D&LS, LF, DC, p.a.), provided only the 2nd documented report for Maryland, the first coming from the same location exactly 4 years ago. The Maryland Records Committee will have to grapple with the question of origin, not to mention the possibility of hybrid “Trumpling” Swans, which have been roaming that region of Maryland since their introduction to local lakes several years ago. Mute Swans continue to spread, pushing into new and old W. Shore locations in disturbing numbers. Greater White-fronted Geese were found at 3 Coastal Plain and one Piedmont locations. A first for Maryland’s Piedmont was an imm. **Ross’ Goose** at Black Hills Res., *Montgomery*, with Canada Geese Dec. 30 (†JB), †MG, p.a.). One imm. blue morph near Ridgely Dec. 17 (JLS) and an ad. white morph (MJI) there Dec. 24, with a probable ad. Ross’ x “Blue” Goose (ph. MJI) provided overdue first records for *Caroline*, MD. Additional birds were seen at more traditional locations, such as two at Black., Dec. 6 (JBC), two at St. Martin’s, *Worcester*, Dec. 30 (ph. MLH), and five (including one ad. blue morph) with a Ross’ x Snow Goose hybrid at Mappsville, *Accomack*, Feb. 9 (DA). Snow Geese came to inland fields in peninsular Virginia, abandoning frozen coastal marshes for farm fields and ponds on the outskirts of small towns (GR).

Three Brant at Turkey Pt., *Anne Arundel*, were good for the Bay Dec. 30–Jan. 1 (PD). A Canada Goose hunting ban was imposed this winter: While resident breeding populations continue to grow and produce high inland counts, the migrant wintering population appears to be down. A goose of the smaller Canadian race was seen with diving ducks at Cambridge Dec. 30 (ph. BT, AB), and several others were reported by observers with flocks of larger Canada Geese. The 33 Wood Ducks on the Ocean City CBC set a surprising new high, while 60 in a snow-covered field near Ironshire, *Worcester*, Feb. 17 (MLH) were probably early scouts from the south. Two ♂ “Eur.” Green-winged Teal were reported, one at Cape Charles Dec. 29 (HTA) and one at Black., Feb. 19 (†JSc,

p.a.). Blue-winged Teal lingered through December only as late as the Black. and Cape Charles CBCs. Gadwall counts seemed high, with several CBCs reporting record counts. Only one Eur. Wigeon was found, a male on the Cape Charles CBC Dec. 30 (GLA). An enormous flock of Canvasbacks at Annapolis was among 29,038 for the Annapolis CBC Dec. 31 (*vide* HLW) and was estimated as 20,000 Jan. 1 (PD). One wonders exactly how many birds were out there; nevertheless, it was one of the biggest flocks in the Region in half a century. Redheads were reported from more locations than, usual with better-than-average numbers almost across the board, though no 3-figure counts were received. One ad. ♂ **Tufted Duck** at Chinc., Jan. 27–28 (F&MW, †VK, SHD, p.a.) was only the 3rd ever reported in the Region. The question of the bird’s origin is, of course, open to speculation, but the bird likely came S as New England froze over (VK). Local waterfowl collectors confirmed that none was missing from their collections (MW, *vide* VK). Up to two Com. Eiders were at the C.B.B.T. through February (v.o.), and about ten were at Ocean City inlet through early December; a high count of 20 was there Jan. 6 (JBC), which quickly dwindled to only a few that remained through the season. A single ♀ King Eider showed up there for the CBC Dec. 28 (POB), and two ♂ Harlequin Ducks remained through the period. The first-year ♂ Harlequin Duck at P.R.N.A.S. found by Lister Feb. 28 was joined by Maryland’s 2nd documented **Barrow’s Goldeneye**, a drake found by Craig later that same day and present through March (†PC, ph. JLS, m.ob., p.a.). Many observers got to see this bird, and a 2nd drake that was present intermittently, thanks to the hospitality of base naturalists Lister and Rambo. Scoter numbers appeared to be low but unusual inland reports included a Surf Scoter at Oxon Hill, *Prince George’s*, Dec. 16 (PGD) and a pair of White-winged Scoters at Beaverdam Res., *Loudoun*, Dec. 1 (DA). Portlock had a nice count of 13,975 Ruddy Ducks at Washington’s Birthplace, *Westmoreland*, Dec. 17. Exotic waterfowl included a Black Swan continuing at E.N.N.W.R., Jan 6 (JLS), a ♂ Mandarin Duck at Upper Marlboro, *Prince George’s*, Feb. 1 (JLS), a ♂ Baikal Teal at Pasadena, *Anne Arundel*, Feb. 10–12 (ph. EI, †LMP) and possibly the same bird several mi away Feb. 26 (DAi), and one White-cheeked Pintail at Holmes Run, Alexandria, Dec. 24 (AM).

#### Raptors to Shorebirds

Ospreys have been arriving earlier and earlier in recent years. This year there were 5

February reports, the earliest being one at Salisbury, *Wicomico*, Feb. 14 (D&CB). Bald Eagles have been thriving, as evidenced by new highs for D.C. (39), Black. (117), Ocean City (29), and Hopewell (108) CBCs. Portlock’s regular surveys of 35 mi of the Rappahannock R. found 53 adults and 87 immatures, a new high for his boat survey of the river. Fourteen reports of N. Goshawks were above average, and all were from the Piedmont (v.o.). Maryland has had no previous records of the w. subspecies of Red-tailed Hawk, but 2 reports were received this season. One dark adult was in n. *Kent* Feb. 18 (SR, ph. HLW, LMD) and a rufous morph was reported without details at Wilde L., *Howard*, Feb. 25 (JF, TDC). Almost 30 reports of Rough-legged Hawk were well above average, mostly away from regular sites for the species, and included a 3rd *Carroll* record at Taneytown Jan. 15 (MJI, JLS). Golden Eagles were found at Salisbury Dec. 11 (SJ), one adult in Chevy Chase Dec. 12 (DE), two adults on Wetepquin Rd., *Wicomico*, Dec. 14 (D&CB), one immature at Courthouse Pt., *Cecil*, Jan. 9 (NM), ≤four at Black. through the season (v.o.), and one immature at *Accomack* Feb. 9 (DA). Armistead noted an immature near the Transquaking R. that swooped low over a field and into the forest, apparently in pursuit of a Wild Turkey that had been sitting quietly on a branch.

Bennett reported a covey of N. Bobwhites at Denton, *Caroline*, MD; numbers dwindled constantly throughout the period, perhaps due to the harsh weather. How many other coveys suffered similar losses? Ring-necked Pheasants were virtually unreported, though Wild Turkeys are flourishing, especially in *Frederick* and *Dorchester*. A Black Rail was kicked from a cornfield at the edge of a marsh near Stockton, *Worcester*, Jan. 19 (BTr). Reese found a Clapper Rail Jan. 24 at Chester, indicating that the species may winter in *Queen Anne’s*, the n. limit of the species range along the Bay. At least two King Rails wintered at Huntley Meadows (AH), and a Com. Moorhen near Ironshire, *Worcester*, was a rare winter sight Dec. 28–Jan. 2 (MO, MLH). Good Am. Coot numbers continued until the onset of cold weather forced them out of frozen ponds and reservoirs.

Two Black-bellied Plovers, only the 2nd record for the D.C. CBC, were found at Oxon Hill Dec. 16. American Oystercatchers have become increasingly common winterers in the past several decades, and counts such as a new high of 71 for the Ocean City CBC Dec. 28 (*vide* CSR)

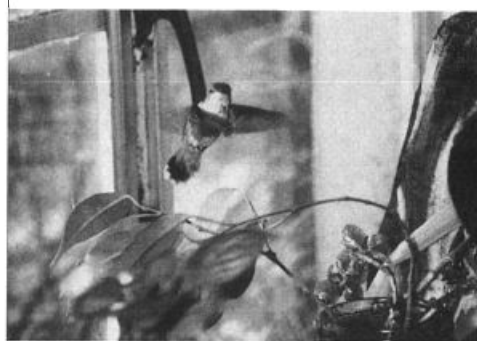
and 75 at Chinc., Feb. 19 (PGD) indicate a continuation of the trend. A single oystercatcher at New Pt. Comfort was a rare winter report for *Matthews* Dec. 30 (JBB). Cape Charles lived up to its reputation as the winter shorebird capital of the Region with 20 species, including 98 Willet, 12 Whimbrel, 64 Marbled Godwit, and 220 Short-billed and three Long-billed dowitchers (identified by call) for the CBC Dec. 30 (*vide* HTA). Other good shorebird reports included a Purple Sandpiper in s. *Matthews* through most of the winter (JBB), 12 W. Sandpipers at Deal Feb. 24 (SJ), 33 Red Knots at Cedar I., Dec. 16 (HTA, BC, MB), good numbers of Sanderlings in the Bay through the season (v.o.), and a Red Phalarope on the Dec. 30 pelagic off Virginia Beach (BP).

### Gulls to Shrikes

A Great Skua was off Virginia Beach Dec. 30 (BP). Several Black-headed Gulls were found at both Rudee Inlet and Ocean City (v.o.), but no Little Gulls were found at all. An ad. California Gull at Hains Pt., Feb. 13–14 (DC, p.a.) was one of only a few D.C. records. An intriguing first-winter Ring-billed Gull was photographed on the C.B.B.T., Jan. 26, with a long, decurved deformation of the upper mandible (ph. RL). Two ad. Thayer's Gulls were found at Conowingo Jan. 6 (EB, EJS), one immature at the Perdue Plant in *Accomack* Feb. 9 (DA), and one adult at Alpha Ridge landfill, *Howard*, Feb. 10 (EJS). Only about ten Iceland Gulls were found, and even fewer Glaucous Gulls, though one "Nelson's Gull" was found off

Virginia Beach Feb. 10 (DA). A couple observers reported fewer Lesser Black-backed Gulls than usual, though it is tough to discern any pattern from the spotty reporting. Please continue to report this species so we can track whether it is still expanding in the Region. Black-legged Kittiwakes were scarce offshore, with five off Virginia Beach Feb. 10 (JFI) being the most reported. A few Forster's Terns stuck out the winter in the New Pt. Comfort area, though they are very rare in the Bay in winter, with the last two there Feb. 19 (JBB). The Feb. 10 pelagic off Virginia Beach found state record counts of 480 Dovekies and 40 Atlantic Puffins, but only ten Razorbills. The Feb. 18 trip off Ocean City had 56 Razorbills, no Dovekies or puffins, but added one Com. and three Thick-billed murrets to the mere handful of records of each of those species for Maryland (BP, MO, m.ob., p.a.).

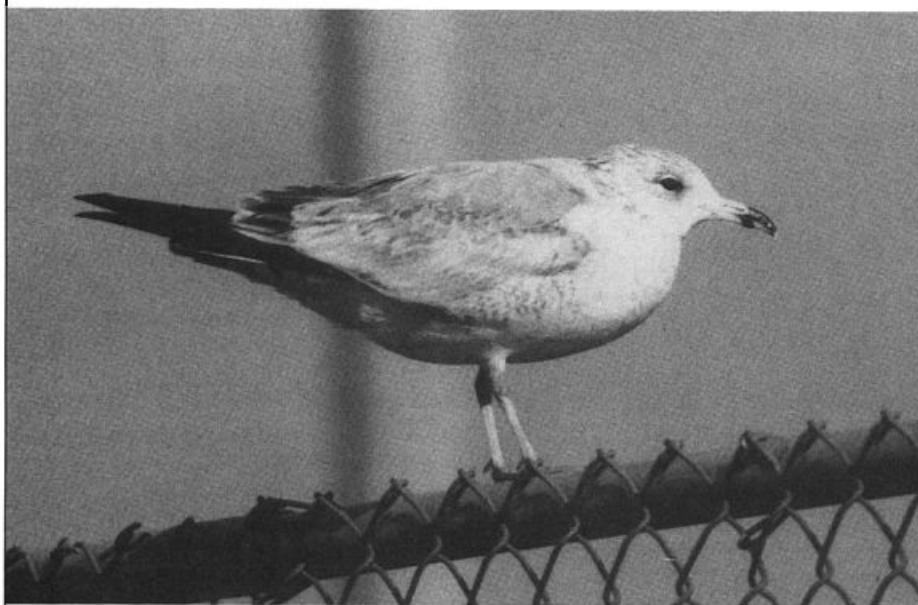
Long-eared Owls were found at 10 locations scattered from the Piedmont to the coast, but no more than two birds were ever found at a single location. Short-eared Owls were found more than usual, with several new locations for the species in *Cecil*, *Charles*, and *Saint Mary's* among the 28 locations reported. At least 38 N. Saw-whet Owls at 20 locations were well above average, and was indicative of the species' record invasion year in the Region. Quite a number of road-killed saw-whets were found, but several were also heard giving the "saw-whetting" call, a rare occurrence in the Region. *Selasphorus* hummingbirds continued in D.C. with the two at John Hays' house through at



Spending the winter on a screened-in porch in Virginia was this *Selasphorus* hummingbird—evidently an adult female (based on throat pattern), and probably a Rufous (based on width of the outer tail feathers). Photograph/John Dalmas.

least Dec. 16 (OJ, m.ob., p.a.) and the ad. male at Chesapeake continuing through Jan. 11 (*vide* VK, p.a.). A fascinating new report was the apparent ad. female that wintered on a screened porch in Bowling Green from late October+ (ph. WSP, J&TD, p.a.). Ringler reported above-average numbers of Red-headed Woodpeckers in *Carroll*, but few other reports of the species were received. A well-preserved Red-shafted x Yellow-shafted Flicker corpse was found in the top of the Smith I. lighthouse for the Cape Charles CBC Dec. 30 (*vide* HTA). Despite a number of reports in December, it was no surprise that only one E. Phoebe was reported after the January storms, a Feb. 10 bird in *Howard* (PO). Horned Larks were common and far more visible than usual as flocks were forced to roadsides and manure spreads when their favorite fields were covered with more than a foot of snow. Tree Swallows lingered late in good numbers and returned exceptionally early (perhaps following the Ospreys), with the first one at Chinc., Feb. 19 (PGD) and another 7 reports Feb. 24–26 (v.o.).

A bird showing characters of a Black-capped Chickadee, well-described and photographed at a feeder in Hollywood, *Saint Mary's*, Dec. 26+ († ph. KR, † ph. PC), was a rare out-of-range bird (and the only one this winter), regardless of its parentage. Both White-breasted and Red-breasted nuthatches continued to be widespread in good numbers throughout the season, with White-breasted verging in areas where they are virtually absent most years. Several observers commented on the scarcity of Carolina Wrens after the storms. This species is typically one of the hardest hit in harsh winters: the Migration Count in mid-May should help to determine the magnitude of the wren mortality. Semi-hardy winterers such as House and Marsh wrens and Ruby-crowned Kinglets



Reliance on bill shape as a field mark could have made this a tough call. This bird at the Chesapeake Bay Bridge-Tunnel, Virginia, January 26, 1996, appeared to be a typical first-winter Ring-billed Gull except for its notably long bill. Photograph/Robert H. Lewis.

seemed to vanish after late January, as well. Blue-gray Gnatcatchers were reported on 3 CBCs. Some E. Bluebirds didn't last the winter either; several observers commented on their general scarcity after the storms, while others checked in bluebird boxes to find numbers of expired individuals. Hermit Thrushes and Am. Robins both seemed pretty common early in the season, though Hermit Thrushes were hard hit, at least in the Piedmont, after the weather. Hughes Hollow hosted a swarm of 1134 Cedar Waxwings Dec. 17 (JBj). Single N. Shrikes continued at Lucketts with an adult through at least Jan. 30 (VK, †SC, m.ob.); one immature at The Wildfowl Trust through at least Dec. 22 († ph. MJI, ph. JLS, m.ob., p.a.); an adult at Assat., Jan. 14+ (JBC, p.a.); and an immature in Exmore, *Northampton*, Feb. 9 (DA). Loggerhead Shrikes were unusual at Lucketts Dec. 29 (BH) and Mardela Springs, *Wicomico*, Feb. 19 (JLS).

### Warblers to Finches

Lingering warblers included a Nashville at Dameron, *Saint Mary's*, Dec. 2 (PC); a Cape May at Roanoke, *Roanoke*, Dec. 7 (MS); a Prairie for the Triadelphia CBC Dec. 16 (*fide* NS); a Black-and-white in Fairfax Dec. 31 (PGD); and ♂ Wilson's at Columbia Dec. 10 (†KS), and Dyke Marsh Dec. 31 (CM). New Pt. Comfort, *Mathews*, hosted two Painted Buntings: an imm. male for the Mathews CBC Dec. 31 (PB, *fide* JBB) and an ad. male Jan. 20 at a feeder (BA, *fide* JBB). A ♂ Indigo Bunting at Octoraro Lakes, *Cecil*, Feb. 3 (KD) was at the same location as the year before and was extremely rare for the Region in winter. American Tree Sparrows were more abundant than any other time in the past decade, reminding some of the numbers of many years ago. They were reported from all corners of the Region, though they were many times more common on the Piedmont than elsewhere. The storms only made them more evident, driving them from weedy fields to backyard feeders. Single "Ipswich" Savannah Sparrows on the Ocean City and Cape Charles CBCs were disappointing totals, but three Le Conte's on the Back Bay count Dec. 29 (†GLA) was nice (though Armistead writes that they are almost expected on that count now). Michael O'Brien reported a "Nelson's" Sharp-tailed Sparrow on the Ocean City CBC Dec. 28. Song Sparrow numbers appeared to crash after the snows, but were replenished by late February migrants. Four Lincoln's Sparrows on the Triadelphia CBC Dec. 16 (*fide* NS) was a remarkable total for this extremely

scarce winterer. With the increased visibility of the Horned Larks came increased visibility of Lapland Longspurs and Snow Buntings. Both species were found in most large Horned Lark flocks, especially on patches of manure spread on snow covered fields, with *Charles*, *Cecil*, *Queen Anne's*, and *Wicomico* garnering first records of longspurs. Outdoing all other reports was the mixed bird flock on Clark's Lane, *Caroline*, MD, which was comprised mostly of Horned Larks but included unprecedented numbers of Lapland Longspurs and Snow Buntings. The numbers were probably never accurately assessed, but the high counts are exemplary: 195 Lapland Longspurs Dec. 16 (JLS, SR, WR) and 500 Snow Buntings Dec. 24 (MJI). The longspur count is a record high for Maryland and prompts one to wonder whether this was a boom year for the species or whether they were in fact just more visible in the snow.

A ♀ Yellow-headed Blackbird was at Pond Neck Rd., *Cecil*, Feb. 10 (JLS) and a fly-over imm. male was reported from Seashore S.P. in Virginia Beach Feb. 11 (NB). Brewer's Blackbirds were found at Alexandria Dec. 16 (BL); ≤three at Lucketts Dec. 16–26 (†JD, m.ob.); a pair in Chestertown, *Kent*, (JLS, MJI); *Cecil* Feb. 4 (EB), and Maddox I., *Montgomery*, Feb. 29 (KH). Less than 10 Rusty Blackbird reports were received, and while the species was certainly underreported, it must have been quite scarce. Exemplary of the harsh winter was the incredible report of Com. Grackles capturing and devouring House Finches in Salisbury on at least 2 occasions during the storms in February (SJ)! In the winter finch department, Purple Finches and Pine Siskins were very scarce as per recent years; there were 5 Com. Redpoll reports. Evening Grosbeaks were present in low numbers, and thus put on what would have to be considered a good showing, considering their scarcity in recent years.

### Addendum

The ♀-plumaged *Archilochus* hummingbird that wintered at Grove Pt., *Cecil*, from late November 1994 to early January 1995 has been identified as a Ruby-throated, probably an imm. male, by hummingbird expert Nancy Newfield from the extensive notes, photographs, and recordings that she analyzed.

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