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Nestled away in the pandemonium of the city of Niagara Falls is a quiet paradise, a place where the touch of human kind has not tainted but rather enhanced nature. Here, an environment of greenery and lush vegetation is home for more than 45 tropical birds, and while the surroundings may closely resemble a hummingbird's natural habitat, the steady influx of humans is certainly not a normality out in the wild.

Yet for one hummingbird, this man-made surrounding provided perhaps the most perfect setting – so perfect that it was here where this Sparkling Violetear (*Colibri coruscans*) chose to build a nest. More remarkable, however, is the fact that this particular hummingbird succeeded and hatched what is now the first South American hummingbird successfully reared in North America.

Owner of the hummingbird exhibit, John Petrella summed up his excitement about the event when he exclaimed, "I'm a father" on April 29, 1992.

"I was so excited when I went in that morning to check on her and found she was no longer sitting on eggs, but that there were two babies in the nest. I couldn't believe my eyes," Petrella said. "In fact, I nearly gave up hope because not more than one month before she had the babies, she abandoned a nest because the eggs were not fertile. I didn't think she'd ever have a baby," he said.

Yet when Petrella saw that the eggs had finally hatched, he "hovered over them like a mother for the whole day, and while only one baby survived, I wasn't about to let the other one go," he said. He spent the

day at the greenhouse keeping close tabs on the mother and her baby. He had previously named the mother "Freddie, until I realized it was a female," Petrella laughed.

Petrella quickly realized that Freddie was looking for insects to feed the baby. "There weren't enough flies in the house, so I set out on a fruit fly hunt and I must have called every place in the region looking for a supply. I finally found a professor who teaches at a university about two hours from my place, who said he had some. I got in my car and drove straight there to pick some up."

When Petrella arrived back at the house, Freddie was waiting for him at the door. "As if she knew I was coming, she immediately came right over to me and affectionately picked at my eyes and my face with her beak. She wouldn't leave me alone. When I brought the fruit flies over to the nest, I held the container and she stuck her beak inside. Then she flew over and immediately fed them to the baby. She repeated this process over and over until she felt it had enough food."

Yet the friendliness of this Sparkling Violetear was not a new phenomenon. Petrella said she had been quite friendly for some time.

"Freddie started to be really friendly about half a year ago. She used to come pretty close to me when she realized that I was the hand that fed her, so to speak. Soon, she came within about an arm's length and I held up a feeder. To my surprise, she started feeding out of it almost immediately. From that day on she was always the first in line for nectar, and she would actually fly out of the greenhouse and into the back

room where I prepared the food to greet me. It got to the point where she would even feed out of my girlfriend's mouth," Petrella said. Initially we thought it was because she was wearing red lipstick the same color as the feeder tips, but she did it all the time," he said.

Petrella feeds his birds nectar solution (Nekton) which is imported from Germany. He mixes the solution with purified water and changes feeders at least once a day. The birds also have a variety of flowers to feed on in the greenhouse, but Petrella says the birds only use them when they are new to the house.

"When the birds realize the nectar is there for them and that it's fresh each morning, they get used to it and ignore the flowers," Petrella said.

Although Freddie was friendly with Petrella and those who he brought into the greenhouse with him, she wasn't as adventurous with strangers. He said he was actually happy that this was the case, because he was afraid something could happen to her. Given the lay-out of the greenhouse, there are few areas that are remote and removed from the hustle and bustle of the more than 600,000 people who visit the greenhouse each year. Petrella said this was a major concern to him when Freddie was attempting to build her nest because the tourists and the staff quickly became aware of the location of the nest.

"She initially chose to build a nest in a hanging ivy plant located in the center of the greenhouse. The nest was right outside the feeding area where I came in each morning, but people could walk right below the nest and often stood there to watch her. They were not more than a meter away from her. I think she became a little frustrated because she would fly out of the nest and perform as though she were trying to distract their attention and keep them away from the nest."

Freddie eventually abandoned the nest and her second one was built in another part of the house in the very corner, high on top of a Florida Pine Tree branch.

"It was certainly a lot more inconspicuous than the first nest. I only noticed it when I saw her picking up blades of grass and strands of hair, and I figured she must be trying to build again. I followed her and, sure enough, there was another nest."

When Freddie began building her

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second nest, Petrella hung a bunch of white aquarium filter-floss, and gerbil nesting materials from the ceiling in the vicinity where she was building. At this time, she was already halfway through constructing her nest which she made out of grass blades, moss, stray pieces of hair, spider webs and plant leaves. The next day when he returned to the greenhouse, "she had completed the nest using the materials I provided."

"I knew she knew I wanted to help and it seemed she had become really dependent on me," Petrella said.

And the proof of the bird's trust in her owner and her dependency on him was confirmed when Petrella told one story of a friend he brought to visit Freddie.

"It was soon after she started building her first nest, and Freddie was searching the area for nesting materials. I provided gauze and she was using it to complete the nest. Around



One week after birth, a pair of Sparkling Violet-ear babies reach for food from their mother. The female Violet-ear would hover over the nest, and feed the babies nectar and fruit flies with her beak. The nest is made of spider webs, moss, plant leaves and gerbil nesting material. Only one of the babies survived.

Photos by John Petrella



The first tropical hummingbird born in captivity in North America rests contented in its nest, three weeks after birth. Its mother made frequent visits to the nest every five to ten minutes, bringing nectar and fruit flies which she fed to the baby with her beak.

that time I brought a friend of mine to visit and see the nest. Freddie immediately flew up to us and started picking at my face and to my surprise she did the same to my friend who was an older gentleman with gray hair. She started to pick at his hair and pull strands from his head and then flew back to her nest with them. I realized he was standing close to the gauze and maybe she just thought I was providing some more real, live nesting materials," he laughed.

Val Clear, a hummingbird specialist from Anderson, Indiana has a vested interest in hummingbirds and has gone to extreme lengths in order to get them to reproduce. Yet, he says he's "never heard of any South American hummingbirds being reared in North America, and I have been working with birds for 30 years."

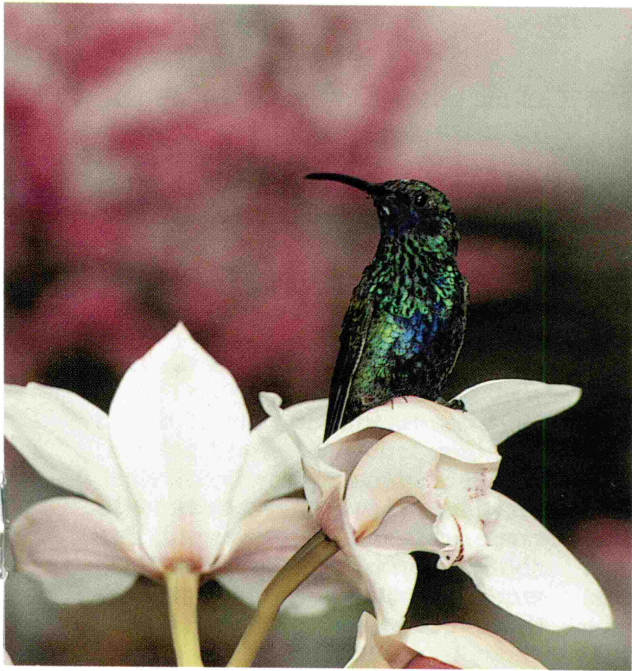
While he hasn't had any success getting tropical birds to reproduce in captivity, he has had several birds build nests and lay eggs, but none of them have ever hatched.

Clear says several people in Europe have managed to breed hummingbirds, possibly because "they have been at it for a lot longer than North Americans."

Clear suggests that the embargo which restricted the importation of hummingbirds into North America hampered breeding. When the government lifted the restriction about eight years ago, he began importing the rare birds. "I traveled to Europe and stayed with a man, Karl Schuchmann who has bred hummingbirds. I wanted to find out what I didn't know about raising the birds. I brought back all of his secrets, but it still didn't work," he said.

The hummingbird enthusiast followed the advice of the German breeder, and kept the male and female hummingbirds together for one hour each day in the morning. He fed them fruit flies in addition to nectar and kept them in large cages outdoors. Even after all this, his efforts were unsuccessful. He says it is remarkable that this particular bird was reared.

Petrella himself still thinks the event was remarkable and something which he prides himself on. Yet he says he's not exactly sure what the real recipe for success was. He is certain, however, that his success with Freddie had largely to do with the friendliness of the bird herself. Petrella says Freddie is not as friendly as she used to be and she is extremely protective of her baby, but



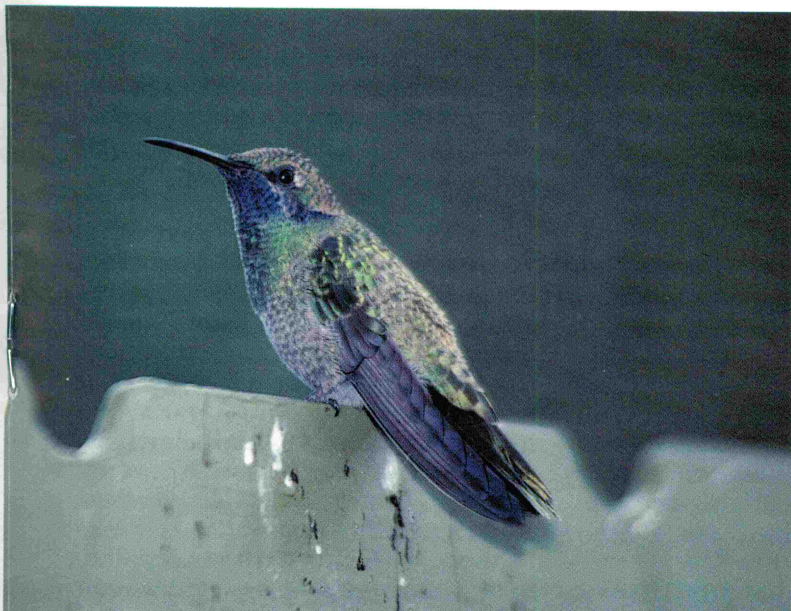
This female Sparkling Violet-ear was the mother to the first tropical hummingbird born in North America. The baby was born in a greenhouse in Niagara Falls, Ontario, a heavy tourist attraction which draws more than 600,000 spectators per year.

he says the mother must have taught the baby something, "because she seems to be following right in her footsteps. Who knows," he laughs, "maybe this whole thing will go full circle and the baby will be the next in line. Now, that really would be a miracle," he said.

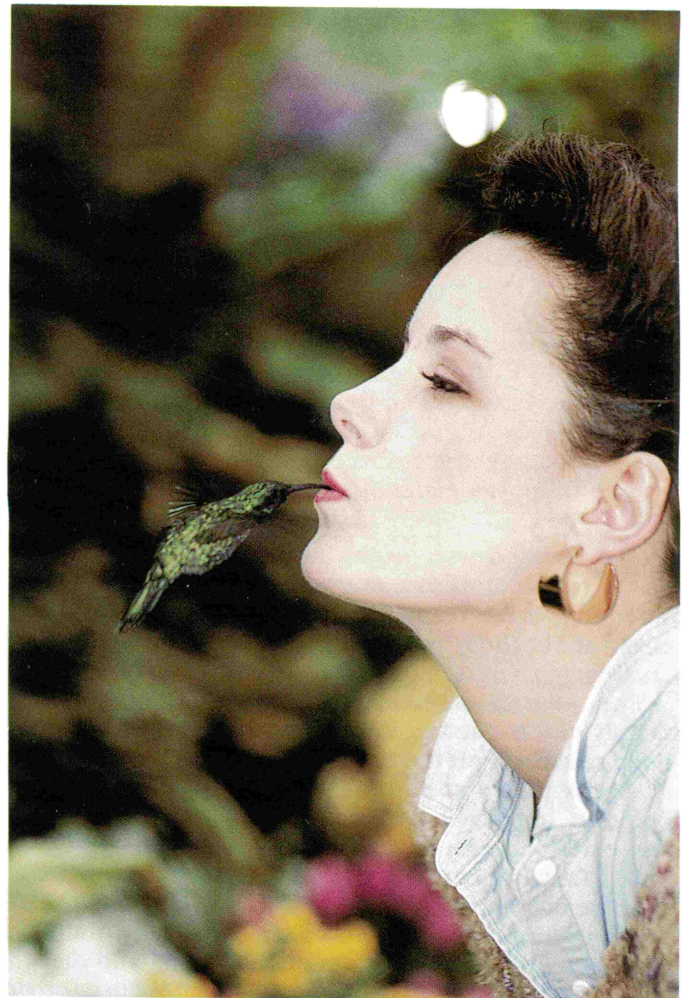
Editor's Note: If any person has knowledge of any species of South American hummingbird being successfully parent reared in captive conditions in North America, we would welcome this information. Please write to Watchbird Editors, c/o The AFA Home Office in Phoenix, Arizona, and we will pass it on to the author of the above article. ●



The female Sparkling Violet-ear brings nectar to the mouth of her baby while in flight. The baby, the first tropical hummingbird born in captivity in North America, was fed by its mother for six and one-half weeks before it ventured out on its own.



Five weeks after birth, the baby Sparkling Violet-ear ventures out on its own into the greenhouse. The baby stayed close to the nest and to its mother. Her flights were short in distance and increased as her wings became stronger and she gained greater control.



A female Sparkling Violet-ear tastes nectar on the lips of one of her caretakers, Lori Bieda. The bird was initially drawn to her mouth because of the bright red lipstick, but soon realized the touch of nectar placed on the lips was there for her tasting. The trick became a daily ritual and the bird would fly to her mouth before even checking the feeders for fresh nectar.