

The Editor's Corner

"Ode to Joy"

Part II By Robi Josephson

One summer's day, a friend who lives near the Preserve sat on her deck next to a flowering red impatiens. She heard a familiar buzz and froze. A ruby-throated hummingbird danced over; instead of feeding, it stopped in mid-air, swung 180 degrees, and faced her. Beak and nose were inches apart. For a few seconds, bird and human saw eye-to-eye. Our friend said, "It gave me the once over," adding that she was cross-eyed after the experience. No comment, buzzed the bird.

Whether eyeing birds or flowers, we try to make meaning of the world and its inhabitants. Our theme for the summer issue is understanding, which can mean comprehension, mutual agreement, interpretation, or even sympathy. How many of these did my friend experience during their brief tete-a-tete? What did the bird understand about her?

Our nesting pair of hummingbirds returned late this spring on May 2. When the male begins courting, the female takes a perch and enjoys the show. He's in full swing, like an ace buzzing the crowd at an airplane show. But his wide, pendulous sways are for an audience of one. "Ah, hummingbirds in love," we say, winking at each other. The female then weaves her nest of plant down, covers it with lichen, and cements it with saliva and spider silk. The

nest is two inches in diameter, about the same size as a large hen's egg. The female builds it in the fork of a tree about 10-15 feet high.

Two pea-sized white eggs are tended by the female. After hatching, the young leave the nest in seven to ten days. Soon it's hard to tell the young from the adults by size. Temperament is another matter. "You think Dad swings?" the young challenge. "Watch this." They zoom, they dive-bomb, they dogfight each other and the adults. They never let up. Feed peacefully? Forget it. The last calm day was the one before they learned to fly.

When do the young finally go off on their own? Do the adults drive them away out of sheer exhaustion? Do the same adults return year after year? Does the female build the nest in the same tree every year? How do they remember where to return?

Every year we understand a little more about the smallest nesting birds in the Shawangunks. When our tiny friends leave in mid-September on their journey south, we miss them. Yet it is only after meditating on our joyful days with them, when once again "they flash upon that inward eye" as Wordsworth wrote, that we gain a new perspective about them. Then we, as humans, can see eye-to-eye with the wonder that is life.

The editor's title is from Beethoven's Symphony #9 with the Final Chorus on Schiller's "Ode to Joy."