

AIS: We're Here To Help

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Author's Note: Names have been changed to protect the, er, obsessed. But, I have to admit, the persons and events described here do bear an uncanny resemblance to those on pp. 8 and 40–47.

It had been a slow morning. I needed to post to the NW CalBird listserv the results of a field trip I led yesterday, but not much to do after that. I called the rare bird alert again, but there were no updates. The ticking wall clock irritated me; at least sand cascading through an hourglass is inaudible, I thought. I began to question why I'd ever gotten into this line of work. What a fool I'd been for thinking I could earn a living from such a quixotic enterprise. Why, if only I'd taken the money I'd invested in the business and...

A knock at the door suddenly delivered me from my dark reverie.

"Come in," I said. The door opened and a sad-eyed woman with slumped shoulders let herself in.

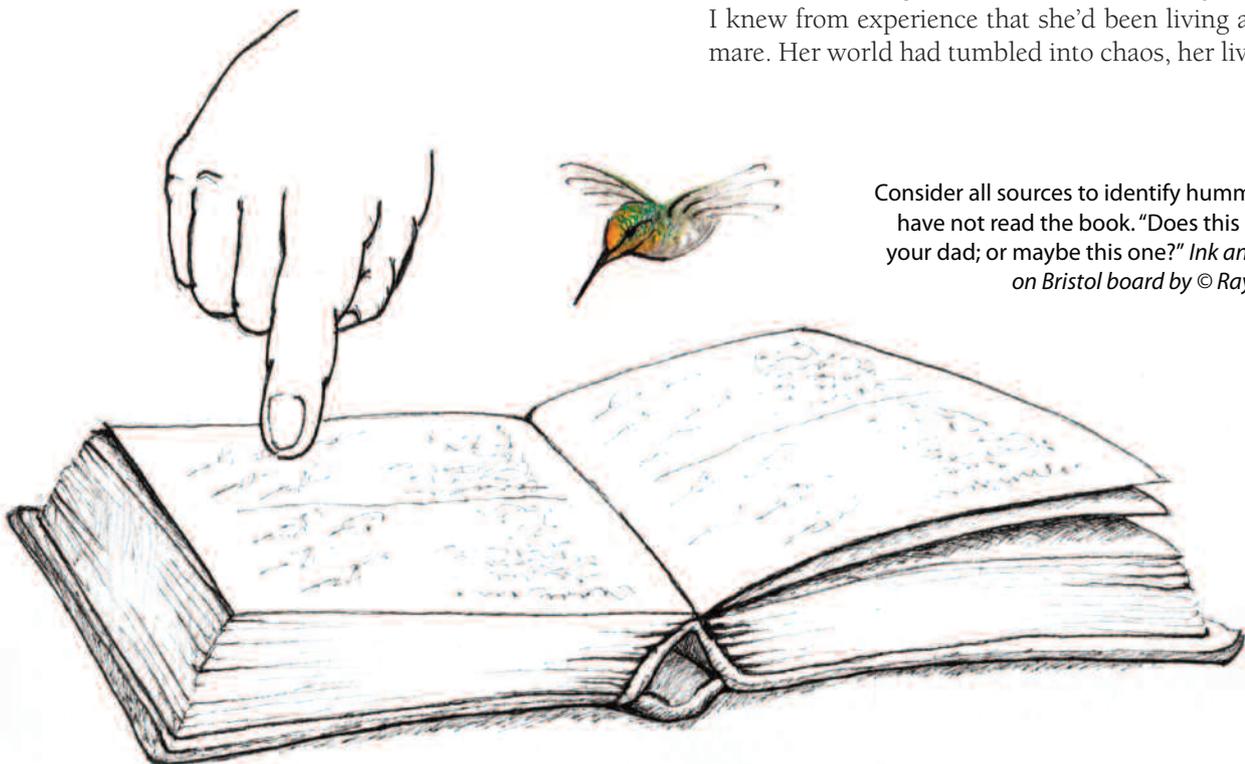
"I'm Timothy Lansing," I said while reaching out to shake her hand. "Owner of Avian Intervention Services—AIS for short. We're here to help. How may I be of service?"

"My name's Katy Kensington. Well... It's about my husband," she began hesitantly. "And birds. You *are* the company that can help, right?"

Experience had shown that these situations are dicey. Progress—reprogramming, if you will—comes slowly, if at all. Even when a measure of success can be claimed, the usual sine wave of recovery includes a relapse or two.

However, with monthly rent and utility bills due next week, I rose to the challenge.

"Of course," I responded with feigned confidence. "But, first, let me jot down some info about your case." I knew from experience that she'd been living a nightmare. Her world had tumbled into chaos, her living sit-



Consider all sources to identify hummers that have not read the book. "Does this look like your dad; or maybe this one?" Ink and acrylic on Bristol board by © Ray Nelson.

uation was out of control. What she needed more than anything was empathy—and the belief that things were going to get better.

“Your husband’s name, please?”

“Jerome Mobird.”

“Mobird?” I repeated, thinking she couldn’t be serious.

“Yes, that’s right. M-o-b-i-r-d.”

“Age and profession?”

“He’s 51. He is...no, perhaps I should say, he *used* to be a contractor.”

“Alright, that’s enough to get me started. Now what is the problem?”

“Well, our problems all started with this frickin’ hummingbird. It’s a hybrid. According to research Jerome’s done, this is the first time an Anna’s has mated with a Magnificent Hummingbird. About four years ago, our neighbors had a female Magnificent visit their feeder for a time. Then, about three weeks ago, we had this huge hummingbird start to come in to our hummingbird feeder. We’ve had a number of bird experts visit our house to view the bird. Everyone, including Jerome, believes the bird to be the offspring of the Magnificent and our more common Anna’s. The bird has this amazing green-gold head and throat: It’s an adult male.”

Green-gold head and gorget? That’d be cool to see, I thought to myself. *But, focus now. There’s a job to do. This woman needs my help.*

“Got it. Okay. Not to put words in your mouth, but I’m guessing your problems revolve around Jerome’s allegiance to this bird. Perhaps at the expense of work, your relationship, and home chores?”

“Yes, YES, **YES!** You’ve nailed it. Every evening I come home from work and he’s there with a camera in hand. ‘Hi, hon. I got a bunch of great photos of Lemon today.’”

“Excuse me, Katy,” I interjected.

“Lemon?”

“Oh, yes! That’s his name for *his* hummingbird. ‘Can you download photos of Lemon for me now?’” he begs.

“The phone never stops ringing. There’s always someone wanting to come over to see the bird. Who knew there were so many people out there who’ll drop what they’re doing to go look at some bird? And, finally, when the people leave, there’s Jerome, hunched over the computer. Before Lemon’s arrival, he couldn’t tell a hawk from a handsaw. Now, via the internet, he’s located a bunch of scientists, photographers, and hummingbird aficionados. He’s in email heaven now, corresponding with new virtual friends about his findings. It’s all about Lemon now: photographing him, discussing nuances of hybrid identification, talking to editors about submitting a photo essay for their journals.”

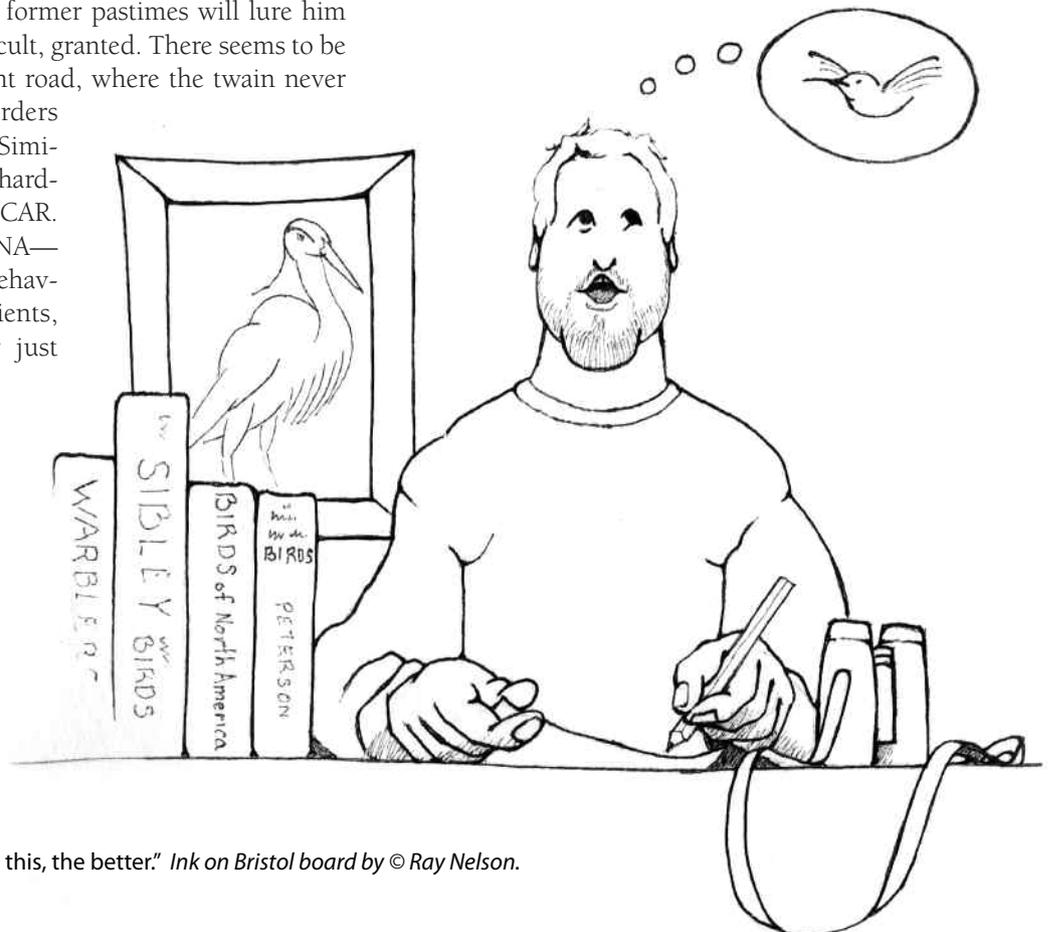
“What were Jerome’s hobbies prior to the arrival of this bird? Sometimes, but not always, all it takes is reintroducing men to what they once embraced: golf, woodworking, fishing, hunting. Personally, I find NASCAR—either on TV or at the racetrack—repulsive. But that’s for you and Jerome to decide. Anyhow, which former pastimes will lure him away from Lemon? It’s difficult, granted. There seems to be a fork in one’s development road, where the twain never meet. I know very few birders who golf and vice versa. Similarly, I’ve never heard of a hardcore birder who’s into NASCAR. There’s something in the DNA—or perhaps it’s a learned behavior. My patients—well, clients, really—tell me that they just don’t ‘get off’ on more common pursuits such as yard sales, shopping, and company picnics. Unless they happen to occur at a birding hotspot at the right time of year...”

Suddenly, I realized that I was doing all of the talking. “I’m sorry, let’s get back to Jerome and

his hobbies.”

“Well, in the Years B.L.—before Lemon—he spent a lot of time in his woodshop, making cabinets and moldings and trim for remodeling projects. He used to be a chess player; he’s got a half-finished chess set he was making from wood. But, like everything else in his life, it’s abandoned, lying fallow.”

“Yes, I’ve tried to get at the root of disinterest for nearly all things non-avian in my patients,” I replied. “One gentleman put it this way: ‘For me, it’s about the wonder of it all. Take the Ruby-throated Hummingbird. How can this creature, one that weighs no more than 4.5 grams, be capable of a 500-mile nonstop flight across the Gulf of Mexico? Think about the drama involved: If a flock of migrating birds encounters headwinds and thunderstorms, the journey swiftly turns into a life-and-death struggle. The birds either make landfall—or maybe an oil-drilling platform—or die. What can compete with that? Car racing? Puhleeze. You put gas in a car’s tank, stomp down on the



“The sooner we get started on this, the better.” Ink on Bristol board by © Ray Nelson.

accelerator, and it goes fast. Where's the wonder, pathos, or mystery in that?"

Katy looked nervously around the room. She inspected the binoculars on my desk, my Sibley guide, and my scope and tripod in the corner. She then glanced at my computer monitor, which still displayed my half-written summary of birds seen for the listserv. I could tell she was sizing me up, calculating the odds of getting her husband back.

"Mr. Lansing..."

"Call me Tim, please."

"Tim, can I ask you a personal question?"

"Sure."

"Looking around your office, it's clear to me that you yourself are a birder. How is it that you're still able to function, that you haven't let birds dominate your life?"

"That's a good question, Katy. But your assessment is one with which my ex-wife would disagree. That was a learning experience, to be sure. It's all about finding balance in one's life. For some folks, birds have assumed center stage, around which their entire life revolves. Now, if they happen to have a spouse that shares their enthusiasm, the odds are in their favor of things working out just fine. And in cases where the spouse lacks an interest in all things avian, there are plenty of examples where, through compromise and understanding, harmony in the home can be preserved."

Katy sat up in her chair and managed a half smile. "Well, it's worth a shot," she said. "I'm still in love with Jerome. I *want* to make it work."

"Fine, then. Have Jerome give me a call and we'll set up an appointment. The sooner we get started on this, the better."