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Beauty for the Birds
Lessons from Hilton Pond



Ripple Effect

Hilton Pond teaches life's lessons
at the water's edge

BY MARGOT ROCHESTER

out & about

As soon as they finished their graduate work at the University of Minnesota in 1981, Bill Hilton Jr. and his wife, Susan, headed home to York, South Carolina. After spending four years away from their southern roots, they knew exactly what they wanted: 4 to 5 acres of land, a livable house, big trees, and water, either a pond or spring. Another requirement was a magnolia tree in the front yard, a symbol of their return to the South. Of course, the property had to be affordable for a couple just finishing grad school.

Discouraged after looking at two disappointing properties, the Hiltons decided to visit one more. They arrived on the scene as the sun was going down.

The farmhouse, built in 1918, charmed them. In back was a 2-acre pond. Red oaks

and white oaks, a pecan tree, eastern red cedars, dogwoods and shagbark hickories were scattered throughout the property. And to the left of the house, resplendent in the glow of sunset, was a classic magnolia with a mockingbird looking down on them from the top of the tree.

"It had to be an omen," Hilton said.

While at the University of Minnesota, Hilton had earned a Master of Science degree in ecology and behavioral biology. He took every course he could in natural history: birds, mammals, reptiles and amphibians, animal behavior, fish and plant life. His special interest was blue jays, a much-maligned species that, according to Hilton, played an invaluable role in creating the great oak forests of America. Squirrels bury acorns close to the tree that dropped them. Blue jays can hold three acorns in their beaks and fly

Young ducks learn life lessons of their own, including how to swim, on Hilton Pond in the piedmont region of South Carolina.

Left: Bill Hilton Jr. helps an injured hummingbird sip nectar from a feeder.

Below: A male Ruby-throat awaits the banding process done to track his migration.

PHOTOS BY BILL HILTON JR.



for miles before dropping them.

The site that was to become Hilton Pond was not ideal when they first saw it, but, as an ecologist, Hilton was able to recognize its potential. In the summer of 1982, Hilton began his life's work: transforming the old farmstead into The Hilton Pond Center for Piedmont Natural History.

"The beach and mountains are more attractive to naturalists," Hilton says. As a result, he speculates, the Piedmont region of the Carolinas is one of the least understood regions of the eastern United States.

Now an energetic 60, Bill has spent much of his adult life examining, pondering and explaining this neglected ecology. The mission of the Hilton Pond Center for Piedmont Natural History is "to conserve plants, animals, habitats and other natural components of the Piedmont Region of the eastern United States through ob-

ervation, scientific study, and education for students of all ages."

Hilton Pond has been designated an "Important Bird Area" by the National Audubon Society and Birdlife International. It is the smallest property with this designation and the only small property to receive funding from the National Science Foundation.

"This recognition is largely the result of our banding program," says Hilton, who is one of six people in the Carolinas licensed to band birds. He says he bands all birds that enter his traps and nets because "no one else is doing it."

Hilton Pond is not just a shelter for birds, but it's also a sanctuary of native trees, shrubs, grasses and wildflowers that provide food, shelter and nesting space for birds, small mammals, reptiles, amphibians and insects. Flowering plants such as

ox-eye daisies, fleabanes and goldenrods are valued for their ability to attract pollinators. Broomsedge and forsythia provide shelter for ground-nesting birds.

Hilton plans to turn his patch of lawn into a hummingbird garden, but for years he has depended solely upon a massive crop of trumpet creeper (*Campsis radicans*, also known as trumpet vine) to attract and sustain the hummingbirds that visit Hilton Pond.

"If you plant only one plant to attract hummingbirds," Hilton advises, "it ought to be trumpet creeper."

Not only is the bloom perfectly structured for the hummingbird's beak, but also the vines begin blooming just as the first chicks leave their nest. Blooming ends as hummingbird migration begins. Trumpet creeper grows in every state where Rubythroats breed, Hilton says. "There has to

Landscaping for hummingbirds

Hummingbird feeders attract these tiny migratory birds, but they'll visit your garden even more often if you include hummer-friendly plants in your landscape.

Native plants for hummingbirds

Red buckeye (*Aesculus pavia*)

Red columbine

(*Aquilegia canadense*)

Trumpet creeper (*Campsis radicans*)

Spotted jewelweed

(*Impatiens capensis*)

Canada lily (*Lilium canadense*)

Cardinal flower (*Lobelia cardinalis*)

Trumpet honeysuckle

(*Lonicera sempervirens*)

Bee balm (*Monarda didyma*)

or wild bergamot

Native deciduous azaleas

(*Rhododendron calendulaceum*;

R. vaseyi)

Catawba rhododendron

(*R. catawbiense*)

Indian pink (*Spigelia marilandica*)



Red columbine

(*Aquilegia canadense*)



Cardinal flower

(*Lobelia cardinalis*)



Bee balm

(*Monarda didyma*)

PHOTOS BY BARBARA REASANT

Non-native plants for hummingbirds

Mimosa tree (*Albizia julibrissin*)

Butterfly bush (*Buddleia davidii*)

Cigar plant (*Cuphea ignea*)

Common foxglove

(*Digitalis purpurea*)

Cypress vine (*Ipomoea quamoclit*)

Shrimp plant (*Justicia brandegeana*)

Shrub verbena (*Lantana camara*)

Pineapple sage (*Salvia elegans*)

Giant blue sage (*Salvia guaranitica*)



Butterfly bush

(*Buddleia davidii*)



Common foxglove

(*Digitalis purpurea*)



Pineapple sage

(*Salvia elegans*)

GLORIA COWINGTON

BARBARA REASANT

BARBARA REASANT

be a connection," he speculates.

Hilton answers visitors' questions thoughtfully, but he seems more content asking people to examine clues and come up with their own logical answers. Pointing out mysterious stripes of holes bored into a pecan tree, he explains that yellow-bellied sapsuckers are responsible for the pattern. The sapsuckers bore the holes to release sap. In turn, the sap attracts insects, thus providing the birds with fat and protein. Early-arriving hummingbirds also use the sap holes for sustenance until plants produce nectar-bearing flowers.

On a typical winter day, Hilton checks his traps, gently removes captured birds, and bands them with uniquely numbered tags provided by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. The best days are snow days, when corn and millet might attract 100 or more birds. He captures, bands and releases the birds.

A significant portion of Hilton's day is spent at his computer writing up research, managing his Web sites, answering e-mail and, since 1999, producing "This Week at Hilton Pond," a photographic journal describing on-site events and phenomena.

Hilton has identified 165 avian species — 30 of which are Piedmont nesters — since he began his research in 1982. He has banded 46,582 birds, including 3,246 Ruby-throated hummingbirds (*Archilochus colubris*), the Southeast's only breeding hummingbird. "Every one of those birds we've banded I've held in my hand," Hilton says.

Whenever his "mist nets" are stretched on the woodland trail — between April 1



A juvenile male Ruby-throated hummingbird.

BILL HILTON, JR.

and the end of May — Hilton works from daylight to dusk, spending 45 minutes going from net to net, and then repeating the process.

His interest in hummingbirds grew as he

While you're in York, South Carolina

Downtown York

www.yorkdowntown.com

Sylvia Theater is a restored theater that has first-run movies and live entertainment. Unusual for a town as small as York.

Kings Mountain State Park

15 miles northwest of York, SC
www.nps.gov/kimo

Adjoins Kings Mountain National Military Park (Federal facility). Mix of nature and history at both locations.

McKelvey Center

212 E. Jefferson St.
York, SC 29745
(803) 684-3948

McKelvey includes a 560-seat theater that is home to the Yorkville Players Theatre Group and Center Stage, an Arts-in-Education program serving regional school children. McKelvey Center also houses the Historical Center of York County whose archives are available for genealogical and historical research related to

the region. Research databases include 18th and 19th century occupations; Confederate veterans; Revolutionary War Battle Inventory; Blacks in the American Revolution; Bobby Moss Southern Revolutionary War Collection index.

York Seafood Family Restaurant

1880 Old York Rd. (State Hwy 161)
York, SC 29745
(803) 684-9485

Garden Café

3007 West Liberty St.
York, SC 29745
(803) 684-7019

The Museum of York County (MYCO)

4621 Mount Gallant Road
Rock Hill, SC 29732-8666
(803) 329-2121
www.chmuseums.org/ourmuseums/myco/index.htm
Features a planetarium, a collection of mounted animals from Africa, art galleries and a nature trail. The whimsical art of Vernon Grant, the creator of "Snap! Crackle! Pop!"

characters for Kellogg's Rice Krispies cereal, is displayed.

Winthrop University

Rock Hill, SC 29732
www.winthrop.edu

Historic Brattonsville

just south of York, SC
(803) 684-2327
A 775-acre historic site that includes a Revolutionary War battlefield. Each July a two-day event commemorating the Battle of Huck's Defeat (a revolutionary war skirmish) is recreated near its original battlefield site. The site features more than 30 historic structures, which may be toured and are also used during living history programs where costumed-interpreters relive the past by demonstrating a variety of programs. Of interest to many visitors is Historic Brattonsville's role in the making of the Revolutionary War epic *The Patriot*. Several buildings on site were used in the production.

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observed the feeders around his property.

In a recent newsletter, Hilton writes: "I never cease to wonder how these balls of fluff can survive even the difficulties of day-to-day existence at my old farmstead, much less how they avoid the perils of long-distance migration."

Yet Rubythroats migrate from as far north as New England and Southern Canada, south to Central America every winter. No hummers overwinter in the Hilton Pond area. Most begin moving out in late August and never stay past October 15. In spring, males return to Hilton Pond no earlier than March 28, and fe-


males soon follow.

There is no question in Bill's mind that hummingbirds return to old sites. "We will never understand migration," he states, but we can be sure "migration pattern is passed on, one generation to another."

Walking rapidly along the woodland trail he mapped out 24 years ago, pointing out emerging plants and evidence of change, Hilton refers to himself as a naturalist-educator. With confident self-awareness, he states, "That's who I am."

Content with his life, passionate about his work, Bill Hilton Jr. is a man with a mission and a vision he is committed to

sharing with the future.

Hilton Pond is open to visitors by appointment only. To subscribe to Bill Hilton Jr.'s "This Week at Hilton Pond" or to find information about programs, field trips and activities, visit his Web sites: www.hiltonpond.org and www.rubythroat.org. 

Margot Rochester has been a freelance garden columnist for 15 years. Her first book, *Earthly Delights: Gardening by the Seasons the Easy Way*, is available through www.carolinagardener.com. Margot and her husband live in the midlands of South Carolina.

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