

# BIRD OF THE MONTH

## YOUNG HUMMERS PREPARE FOR TAKE-OFF

The whirl of young hummingbirds is in the air as they buff up and prepare for their southern journey. Their parents arrived here last spring from as far away as Mexico. Most adults have already started their return to their wintering grounds and the young will be leaving by the end of this month.

Our most predominant hummingbirds that breed in Montana are Rufous and Calliope. Black-chinned are uncommon to rare in the western part of the state. Ruby-throated migrate in small numbers, primarily through the northeastern corner, and Broad-tailed breed along the south-central border. A few Anna's and one Costa's have also been seen in Montana, in late fall.

All hummingbirds belong to the family Trochilidae. There are 328 identified species, all of them in the Western hemisphere. They have tiny bodies (2.5-8.0 grams), long slender bills, and hovering wings. They have the highest metabolic rate of any animal, 50 times faster than a human!

Adult males are generally easier to tell apart than females or juveniles; they are brighter and often act bolder. The Rufous male has reddish (hence the name rufous) sides, tail, and back, sometimes with flecks of green. The gorget (throat patch) is bright orange red. It is aggressive at the feeder and has been seen chasing bees, dragonflies, and hawks! The Calliope male has separated streaks of purple iridescence on its gorget; it is the smallest bird in North America (3 inches long). The Black-chinned male has a predictably black gorget with a band of purple iridescence on the throat below the gorget.

The females that breed here are difficult to tell apart. They have clear or slightly marked throats, and all three species have white tips to their outer tail feathers, as opposed to the all dark tail feathers of the males. Rufous females are predictably rufous on the sides and tail, with some flecks of red on the throat. When perched, the wingtips are slightly shorter than the tail. The wingtips of the Black-chinned female are also slightly shorter than the tail when perched, but she has a long bill and grayish crown and a clear white breast. Calliope females are the smallest with a short (for a hummingbird) thin bill. When perched, wingtips of the female Calliope are slightly longer than the tail.

The young of the year might have left their nests and appeared at your feeders beginning in mid July. They will look like the females but their feathers will appear loose. Rufous hatchlings have green backs. If you have a spotting scope handy, look for the longitudinal wrinkles on the beaks of the young. The young hatch with small stubs for beaks and grow so rapidly the first two weeks that stretch marks are made! By August, the male hummingbirds might be developing more distinguishing markings and the male Rufous hummers will be acting like feisty teenagers.

Adult males arrived here first in the spring and are also the first to leave in the fall, letting the females incubate and care for the kids. Ellie Jones of Bigfork has banded and studied hummingbirds for decades. She knows of one male Rufous banded in Montana that was captured going south in New Mexico as early as late June. By the end of July, the hatchlings have learned to fly and are on their own, so in early August, most of the females leave, and by late September, the last of the young have left. The young will migrate south individually, like their parents, following mountains and feeding on alpine wildflowers. According to Ellie Jones, these little birds that weigh less than a penny can travel over 600 miles without wind and without refueling. Ned and Gigi Batchelder, who have also banded and studied hummingbirds in Montana, report that a hummingbird that was originally banded near Red Lodge on August 1, 2002, as a juvenile, was recaptured in Houston in February, 2005. The distance between these two points is 1314 miles, as the crow flies. What tales she could tell us of her many successful trips to and from her wintering grounds! Another Rufous Hummingbird banded in Virginia one winter was recaptured in Montana the following breeding season. That next winter this particular bird was recaptured in the same Virginia yard where it was first banded!

Hummingbirds face many hazards. According to Ellie Jones, 50% of the young do not survive their first year. Hawks, falcons, Kestrels, and Merlins are the natural predators of the adults. Jays, yellow jackets, and squirrels prey on eggs. In residential areas, cats are the most damaging predator to both parents and young. The weather is also unpredictable, and storms during migration can set them far off course. Like all birds, they are very vulnerable to habitat loss here and south of the border.

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If you are feeding hummingbirds, be sure that you keep your feeders filled at least through September and into October in case you have some stragglers. Feed them only white sugar dissolved in water at a ratio of 4 parts water to one part sugar. Red is needed somewhere on the feeder but do not color the food. Wash feeder well before every filling and place in a shady place to avoid fermentation. If you place your feeders out of sight of each other, the hummers will not chase each other so much.

If you are hoping to attract more hummingbirds next spring, keep in mind that feeders alone will not attract hummers. You will also need water (a shallow bath or sprinkler) and high perches such as dead branches. Native plants beneficial to hummingbirds are: wild larkspur, snowberry, twinflower, wild currant, Indian paintbrush, columbine, bee-balm, penstemon, honeysuckle vine, and sapsucker wells in conifers or fruit trees.

We wish these young hummers a bon voyage and, if we are lucky, a safe return in the spring.

Linda de Kort for Flathead Audubon Society