

Hummingbird's flight patterns, behavior are a wonder to behold

Hummingbirds

by Helen Fancher

One of the most fascinating of all God's creatures is the hummingbird, found only in the Western hemisphere. It is basically a tropical bird but has proven very adaptable.

We have observed four species at our feeder in the last few years: the Costa, black-chinned, Anna's and rufous. A male Costa, however, has claimed territorial rights for the last two summers. He spends most of his day in the palo verde tree nearby ready to challenge any bird who wants to share the syrup. This is characteristic behavior for any hummer who has claimed a territory.

The flying ability of my little Costa, and whenever he is chasing, is a wonder to behold. Aerial acrobatics are used both in

protecting territory and for courtship displays.

The swoops and dives involved show phenomenal control and it is said that the hummingbird actually orients his dive so as to show off his iridescent feathers to the best advantage. A hovering bird is said to move his wings about 78 times a second.

Obviously the fantastic maneuvers of hummingbirds require tremendous energy. The daily energy expenditures of some species have been found to be well over 6,000 calories. Nearly 100 percent of the sugar taken into the body is assimilated. Their food consists largely of nectar and small bugs.

The daily oxygen consumption also is enormous. A resting hummingbird will breathe 250 times a minute. They have the most



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highly developed respiratory organs of any animal.

Since hummingbirds do not feed after dark and their feathers are not adequate for warmth, it would be disastrous for them to spend particularly cold nights without some form of energy conservation. For this reason some hummers are able to lower their temperatures and metabolic rate and become torpid. Actually no hummer will go torpid unless energy reserves are low as it leaves him vulnerable to his

nocturnal enemies.

One of the great joys of observing hummingbirds is to watch for the iridescent glow of the feathers. They have often been referred to as feathered jewels. I shall never forget the sight of a rufous hovering above our deck in the morning sunlight he appeared to be pure gold.

A deplorable historical note on the last century is that thousands of hummingbird skins were sold to Europeans for the decoration of

elegant ladies accessories. In 1888 more than 40,000 hummingbird skins were sold in London alone. Thankfully this practice has been outlawed.

Hummingbirds are necessary for the pollination of some flowers, especially those with a trumpet shape that do not have a fragrance. Insects are attracted to the odor of flowers but that is not important to hummers.

Among these is the chuparosa which blooms most of the year in our area. The hedgehog cactus is the only member of the cactus family which depends on the hummingbirds for pollination.

Perhaps the most common local species is the black-chinned hummingbird. The head and chin of the male are black. An iridescent violet band separates the chin from

a white collar. The Costa male (also common) has a full helmet of glistening amethyst which extends outward to the sides of the neck.

The Anna's hummingbird, seen here usually in winter, has a brilliant crimson helmet and is a little larger than the other two. The male rufous, rarely seen here, is rufous colored on the back and has an iridescent metallic copper gorget.

In the White Mountains the rufous and broad-tailed hummers are common in summer. About 12 species of hummingbirds may be observed on summer visits to Ramsey Canyon, the Chiricahua Mountains and other areas of southern Arizona. We carry with us a small feeder for use on trailer trips around the state.