



HUMMINGBIRDS

An American Dream

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IF YOU HAD BEEN GOD building the natural world — detailing the web of life, assigning all the special jobs needed on Earth, and creating special beasts to string it all together — would you have thought of... *hummingbird*?!?! A bee-like bird that can draw nectar from the deepest blossoms with its tubular, extrusible, brush-tipped tongue and take pollen from flower to flower on its spine-like bill? A shrew-like bird whose metabolism pulses so fast that running bears look to it like rocks? A gem-like bird whose shining iridescence could bedazzle the dead? A bird like the Starship Enterprise that can not only go forward at warp speed but can stop on a molecule and fly backwards or vertically? One that suspends its animation when temperatures get too low and rebirths itself when things warm up? A bird the size of a Brazil nut that can fly nonstop across the Gulf of Mexico? *No way!!*

Dreamlike and American

HUMMINGBIRDS LIVE ONLY IN the Americas, where at least 320 species have evolved from ancestral roots in the tropics. Only 15 species are regular north of Mexico; eight of those have very limited distributions along our southern border, and seven are widespread in the “lower 48” states. Four (perhaps five) nest annually in Canada. One (Rufous) nests well north into Alaska. Throughout the eastern U.S. and eastern Canada, Ruby-throated Hummingbird is most familiar. In the Rockies and Great Basin, Broad-tailed

prevails, and in the West, Anna’s, Allen’s, Rufous, Black-chinned, and Calliope.

Because they always need to be where plants are flowering, most of these species are migratory and come north only to nest. Most individuals of most of these species depart in August and early September (even if artificial feeders are available), to spend the winter in Mexico. Their spring arrival dates are much more broadly protracted and depend on weather patterns and floral blooms. Costa’s moving from Sonora and Baja into Arizona and California deserts can fuel along the way at ocotillo plants, enabling them to travel in December. Allen’s first arrive at Point Reyes about 25 January as milkmaids and red currants begin to bloom. Spring is distinctly later at Cape May, NJ, where

Los Angeles in winter the only expected species is Anna’s. While some Anna’s are migratory, many are year-round residents throughout the species’ range (which is growing), from Ensenada to Vancouver along the Pacific Rim. The usually mild winters along the coastal slope have allowed successful introduction of many exotic plants that flower in winter, and Anna’s Hummingbirds have found each one.

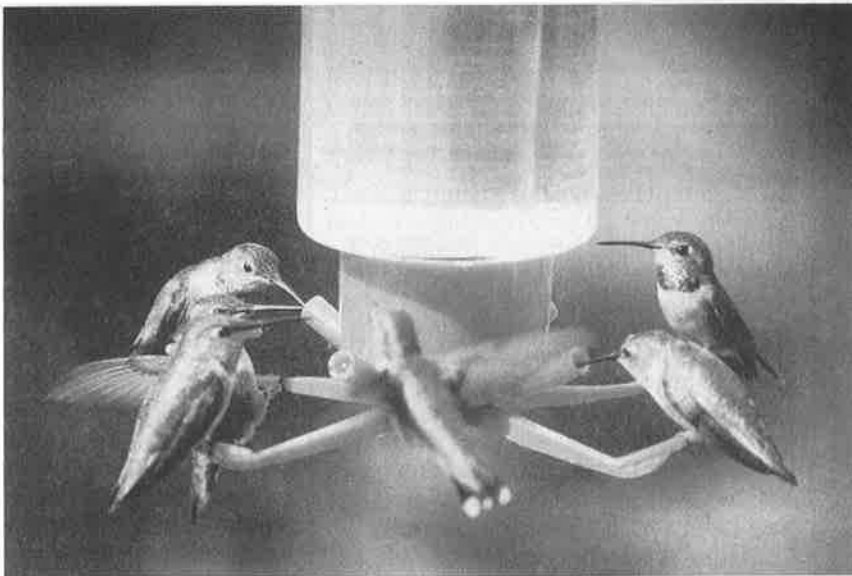
Whether Anna’s were able to winter in their present range before the ornamental plantings brought by humans is unknown. It is known that they are tough little birds. Late one December on a Mount Shasta Christmas count, far from any town, we found a female Anna’s sitting on a nest with a quarter-inch of snow around its rim. As we wondered what possible food was nearby, she flew from her two eggs and began to feed at *tiny* bell-like manzanita blossoms we had overlooked.

Care and Maintenance

FEEDING HUMMINGBIRDS can be a delightful and educational undertaking, but it’s important to do well, and correct “how-to” information is scattered. Some guidelines, from a consensus of friends across the U.S., are offered here.

There are innumerable feeder models: some are excellent, others total failures. We recommend the large, quart-size glass bottles that hang upside-down with a red plastic bottom and four “counter seats” for hummers at the upturned outlets. Most come with plastic flow-ers that fit over the holes, but these are not necessary.

The correct fluid formula is four parts water to one part sugar. Of course they like it sweeter, but it’s not good for them, and 4:1 will keep them happy. Red food coloring should not be used (the red plastic will attract the birds). If a pre-mixed “nectar” packet comes with your feeder, throw it away and make your own. Put four cups of water in a pan with one cup of granulated white sugar (not saccharin, not Nu-



And what do we call a gathering of hummingbirds? A swarm maybe, but that’s too locust-like. How about a chord?

the first Ruby-throateds arrive about 27 April. The first male hummers may not arrive in the high Rockies, Canada, and Alaska until early June when the penstemon wakes up.

There are small, localized populations of resident Costa’s and Allen’s hummingbirds in southern California, but north of

F O C U S 30

trasweet, hummers hate brown sugar, and a honey solution may cause a fatal fungus disease). Stir immediately to keep it from crusty on the bottom. Heat, stirring, almost to a boil (over-boiling gives it a burned taste). When cool, store the syrup in the refrigerator, where it lasts a couple of weeks. During periods of low or no use, serve only a couple of inches at a time. The syrup can spoil in a few days in the feeder outside. Change the fluid and clean the feeder at least once a week, whether or not the birds have found it. If left too long, the syrup ferments, and even though it may look good to you, hummingbirds know better.

Regular feeder cleaning is essential. Use bottle brushes, Q-tips, pipecleaners, and hot water. Soaking only the glass section in water with a drop of bleach will remove the black slime. Be sure to rinse several times afterward.

Hanging a second feeder apart from the first may be appropriate when a bully bird takes charge of your feeder and drives others away. Once a couple other birds move in to use the second food source, the bully usually gives up and just takes a seat at the counter.

Another problem that keeps buzzing is bees in feeders. Commercial bee-guards (little screens that fit over the fountains) can help on the right kind of feeder but are not too effective. Bees find feeders opportunistically, and the same few come back habitually. One solution, from a friend who keeps a large number of feeders in southeast Arizona, is to simply take in bees with a "dust buster" vacuum every

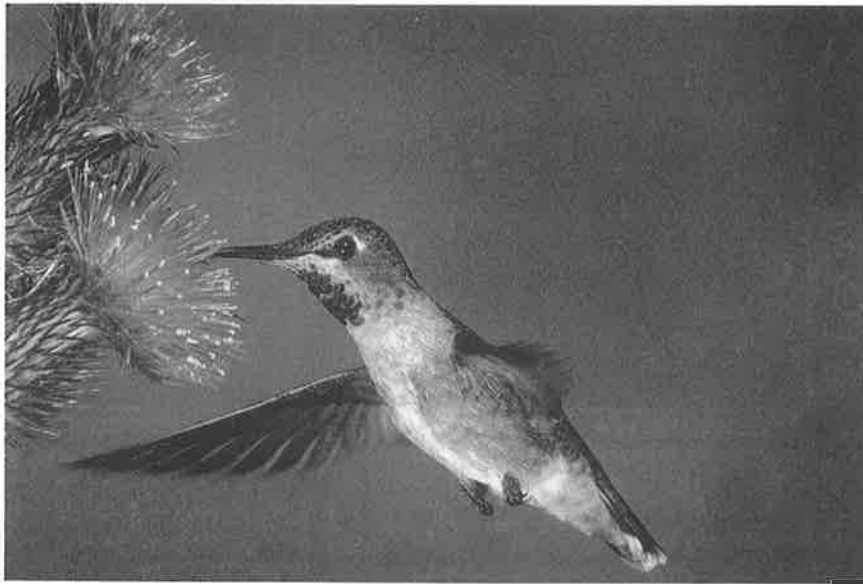
few days. If you didn't want to hurt the bees, you could then keep them as pets or relocate them (to another state); in any case, the feeders would be bee-free for another few days.

Strongly migratory species depart at specific times, regardless of incentives to stay, such as abundance of food. (In central California virtually all the Allen's, an abundant breeding species, vanish in mid-August, leaving year-round resident Anna's wondering why it's so peaceful around the feeders and flowers.) But in most parts of the U.S. and Canada, where autumn cold snaps are likely, hummingbirds should be weaned from feeders about the time of their normal departure. Gradually weaken the fluid sweetness (five or six parts water to one part sugar) to encourage the

hummingbirds to survive. Because they burn fuel so quickly, it's imperative for them to tank up just before going to roost and again first thing in the morning. If they can't, they die. The fluid must not be allowed to freeze overnight in a feeder. At feeders near Point Reyes, because these methods were followed, six Anna's survived a ten-day freeze in December 1990.

HUMMINGBIRDS GIVE US BEAUTY, entertainment, and special view of the natural world. We can repay them by caring for their needs.

Note: For information on "living feeders"—flowering garden plants that hummingbirds appreciate—refer to books like *Attracting Birds* (1990, *Sunset*).



Anna's hummingbird.

birds to seek more natural forage.

If a period of freezing weather arrives while birds are using feeders, take the following steps. Bring the feeders indoors at dark and take them back out at dawn; hang them in the sun. It is not usually cold that kills the birds during such periods, but starvation. The freeze kills all the flowers, in turn killing insects, so artificial feeders will be all that allows some hum-

Amazing but True

HUMMINGBIRDS have the highest metabolism of any vertebrate. The Allen's can beat its wings 35 to 45 times per second.

They need to feed constantly while active, but during cold summer nights at high latitudes, hummingbirds can reduce their energy demands by entering torpor, a brief hibernation.

Male hummingbirds, lacking much in the way of song, use their brilliant throats flashed in sunlight during displays. Each throat feather produces color not with pigment but structurally, bending available light.

At most angles, hummingbirds' throats appear black.

The males defend spring territories during migration, just to attract passing females to copulation. Then the females go on alone—to build nests, incubate eggs, and fledge the young.