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THE TEXAS

HUMMER

SPRING 1997

A NEWSLETTER FOR TEXAS HUMMINGBIRD ROUNDUP PARTICIPANTS

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VALLEY TREASURES



Birders from around the world visit Texas each year to catch a glimpse of some of the many species that call our state home. And near the top of every visiting birder's wish list you can find the Buff-bellied Hummingbird (*Amazilia yucatanensis*). This striking neotropical migrant, with its reddish bill, mango-green throat, and softly buff-colored belly, is the pride of the Lower Rio Grande Valley. As a result, we have chosen to spotlight this beautiful South Texas species in this issue.

Buff-bellied Hummingbirds (*Amazilia yucatanensis*) have long been favorite additions to the life lists of serious birders. In their natural habitat, Buff-bellieds can be seen consuming the nectar of coral honeysuckle (*Lonicera sempervirens*), Texas ebony (*Pithecellobium flexicaule*) and mesquite (*Prosopis glandulosa*). This species is refreshingly simple to identify: males and females look alike; they are the only locally common species with a red bill; and their forked, rufous-colored tail is distinctive. In addition, Buff-bellieds have a more restricted range than most species of hummingbirds. They primarily breed in South Texas and nowhere else in the United States. Although Buff-bellieds are thought to be some of our least migratory hummingbirds, some individuals spend their winters in the Tamaulipas and Veracruz regions of Mexico.

One of the goals of the Texas Hummingbird Roundup is to more accurately establish the range of each species and we are learning more about the distribution of species such as the Buff-bellied Hummingbird each year. A Roundup participant, Ken Dollar of Chambers County, provided us with photographs that will likely result in the addition of this county to the known distribution of the Buff-bellied Hummingbird.

The Texas Hummingbird Roundup wishes to thank our devoted participants, many of whom have been with us for the past three years, for their important efforts in hummingbird conservation. Our staff always looks forward to reading the thoughtful, detailed comments of our participants — and the 1996 Roundup was no exception.

MISSION STATEMENT

The mission of the Texas Hummingbird Roundup is to improve the conservation of hummingbirds by gathering information about their distribution and providing information to the public. The survey encourages Texans to maintain natural habitat for the birds with the use of native plants, properly care for hummingbird feeders and record sightings. Your observations further our knowledge of the hummingbirds of Texas, guide new research efforts, and help the Nongame and Urban Program in its mission to keep these tiny visitors returning each year.

To sign up for the Texas Hummingbird Roundup, please send your \$6 donation with your name, address, county and telephone number to:
Texas Hummingbird Roundup
Texas Parks & Wildlife
4200 Smith School Road
Austin, Texas 78744





ATTACK OF THE LOGGERHEAD SHRIKE

Loggerhead shrikes (*Lanius excubitor*) are fierce, predatory birds that primarily hunt from perches in open country. Though related and similar in appearance to our state bird, the Northern Mockingbird (*Mimus polyglottos*), Loggerhead Shrikes are far less benign in their feeding habits. While taxonomists consider shrikes to be passerines by classification, their prey would almost certainly testify to their raptor-like qualities. A sharp, hooked bill separates the shrike from its songbird cousins and allows for its unique foraging technique. Nicknamed "butcher birds," shrikes prey upon insects, rodents, and small birds which they catch and then impale on thorn trees or barbed wire. Occasionally, they happen upon hummingbird feeders – a very reliable source of food – but it is not the sugar solution that they are after:

feeder and the house, and wait for a hummer to land to feed and then try to catch it. The shrike had found a tactic that worked and, like most creatures, if something works, stick with it. To fix this problem, I removed the perches next to the house, taking away its hiding place."

Ken and Mary Dollar,
Chambers County

"Two male Ruby-throats were fighting over a feeder. They ended up rolling around in the grass. At this time, a Loggerhead Shrike swooped down and flew off with one male."

Greg and Becky Gill,
Brazoria County

BRAVING THE COLD



As in previous years, we received many reports of hummingbirds overwintering in Texas in 1996.

Melvin Walker La Follette of Presidio County submitted a particularly outstanding report of his observations in the Trans-Pecos region:

"In every previous year, bees have swarmed my feeders about the last week of October or early November and I have been forced to take the feeders down. Nevertheless, a male Rufous hung around the winter of 1995-96; I last saw him on 06 March 1996. In the fall of 1996, the bees did not come and I was able to leave the feeders up. On 22 October, I spotted a male and at first thought it was a Broad-tail that I had seen the previous week. However, a couple of good looks told me that I was seeing a male Anna's hummingbird.

I had not seen an Anna's hummingbird since I lived in Santa Clara County, California, back in the sixties; they were a common sight in the summer there.

"What I did not know when I sighted the first Anna's hummingbird was that I would have winter visitors. By 1 November, the number had stabilized at one male and three females. And then the cold weather began, the worst in the fourteen winters that I have spent in this desert Zone 9 climate. We have had over a dozen nights in the twenties and one December night registered 16 degrees. The feeders froze solid and at dawn my little flock were persistently trying to drink the ice. As fast as I could, I defrosted and emptied the feeders and filled them with fresh syrup, making it thicker, 1 1/2 cups sugar to 2 1/2 cups water. They drank and drank until I thought they would never quit. Two or three birds would share the feeder instead of fighting, saving their energy for more eating. I had no more trouble with freezing with the thicker syrup."

"I observed a Loggerhead Shrike feeding on a hummingbird. The shrike was landing on my feeders that I have hanging under the eave of the house. It would get on the back side of the feeder, between the



One of the primary goals of the Roundup is to gather information that will eventually guide new research efforts concerning hummingbirds. Our extensive database is available to biologists who wish to use it for designing scientific studies that will help us learn more about these charming, wondrous birds. Presently, the data that we have collected from our participants over the past three years is being used for just that purpose – assisting in the selection of study sites for a Texas A&M University research project.



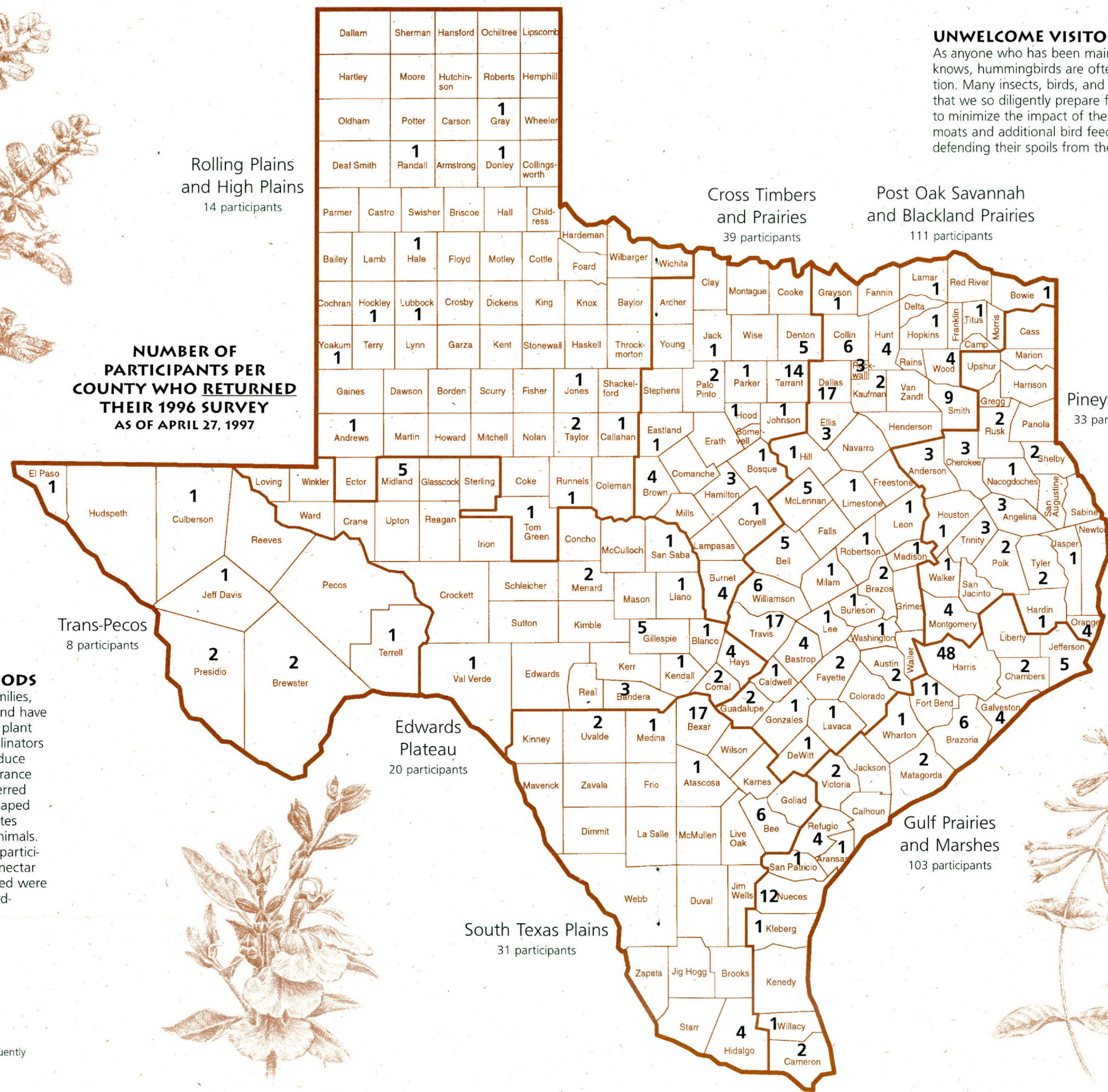
Rolling Plains and High Plains
14 participants

Cross Timbers and Prairies
39 participants

Post Oak Savannah and Blackland Prairies
111 participants

Pineywoods
33 participants

NUMBER OF PARTICIPANTS PER COUNTY WHO RETURNED THEIR 1996 SURVEY AS OF APRIL 27, 1997



UNWELCOME VISITORS

As anyone who has been maintaining a hummingbird feeder for very long knows, hummingbirds are often not the only beneficiaries of nectar solution. Many insects, birds, and even lizards are attracted to the feeders that we so diligently prepare for hummingbirds. Strategies can be taken to minimize the impact of these non-target species, such as the use of ant moats and additional bird feeders, but hummingbirds are accustomed to defending their spoils from these often unwelcome visitors.

5 Most Reported Feeder Pests*

1. Wasps (40%)
2. Ants (24%)
3. Bees (23%)
4. House Finches (30%)
5. Orioles (2%)

*Based upon percentages of wildlife listed as most frequent feeder visitors



FAVORITE HUMMINGBIRD FOODS

Hummingbirds, like nearly all other bird families, are particularly attracted to the color red and have virtually no sense of smell. Not surprisingly, plant species that have co-evolved with avian pollinators often exhibit these traits. Plants which produce red or orange flowers with little or no fragrance are characteristics of species that are preferred hummingbird foods. In addition, tubular-shaped flowers provide an architecture that facilitates pollination by these long-billed, hovering animals. When 1996 Texas Hummingbird Roundup participants observed hummingbirds consuming nectar from their native plants, the species reported were often characteristic of 'typical' hummingbird-preferred plants.

5 Most Preferred Plants*

1. Salvia (19%)
2. Honeysuckle (12%)
3. Hibiscus (7%)
4. Turk's Cap (6%)
5. Trumpet Creeper Vine (5%)

*Based upon percentages of plants listed as most frequently visited by hummingbirds



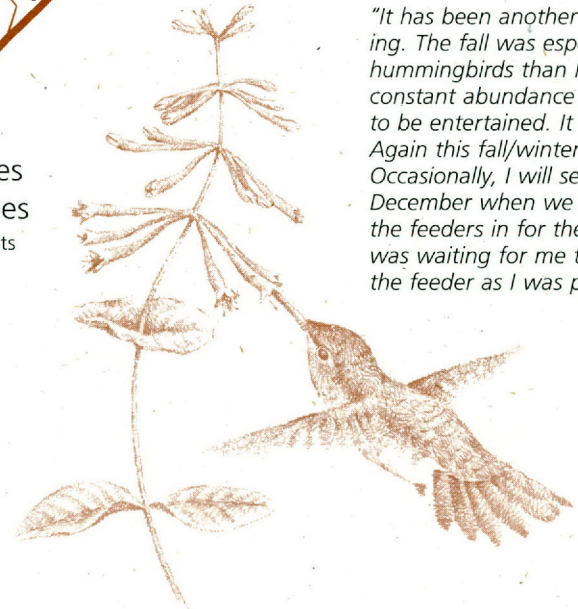
NOTES FROM HUMMER LOVERS

"At the end of September, we had a terrific storm at night. The next morning we overslept and when I opened my bedroom window, it was full daylight and on a wire on the front porch where the feeders hang, I saw at least two dozen or more hummingbirds, looking for all the world like a row of sparrows on a telephone line! I leaped out of bed and ran to get their feeders. They were waiting for their breakfast! And I don't think I will ever forget the sight of all those belligerent hummers sitting patiently waiting for what they knew should already have been waiting for them!"

Jean F. Jones, Austin County

"It has been another enjoyable year of hummingbird watching. The fall was especially busy with more Ruby-throated hummingbirds than I have ever had. They were in such a constant abundance that my neighbors brought their chairs to be entertained. It was like watching a swarm of bees. Again this fall/winter I am daily watching a female Rufous. Occasionally, I will see two females at the same time. This December when we experienced our Arctic blast I brought the feeders in for the night to prevent freezing. My Rufous was waiting for me the next morning and almost landed on the feeder as I was placing it outside again."

Sharon Dadd, Fort Bend County



EXCITING SIGHTINGS

Jan Wimberley was fortunate enough to spot an extremely rare hummingbird species in Val Verde County. She also astutely observed an association between Rufous hummingbirds and tobacco plants:

"We have a place at Box Canyon on Lake Amistad and several hummingbirds were observed there late this fall and winter. [October 31]... Several Rufous hummingbirds were seen in the tobacco plants in the slough behind our place. A Violet-crowned was seen behind our place and was observed for 10-15 minutes perching on yucca plants. It was documented and photographs were sent to the Bird Records Committee. This same trip, two male immature Anna's hummingbirds were observed and one immediately dominated the feeder put out. The tobacco plants were numerous and still had some blooms when we were there in the middle of December. [January 2-4]... One of the Anna's remained and came to the feeder soon after I filled it. The tobacco plants had quit blooming and no Rufous hummers were observed."

Editor's Note: If accepted by the Texas Bird Records Committee, Mrs. Wimberley's record will be only the third Violet-crowned Hummingbird documented in Texas.

On the other side of the state in Fort Bend County, C. W. Embree hosted a beautiful guest, a partially **albino** hummingbird:

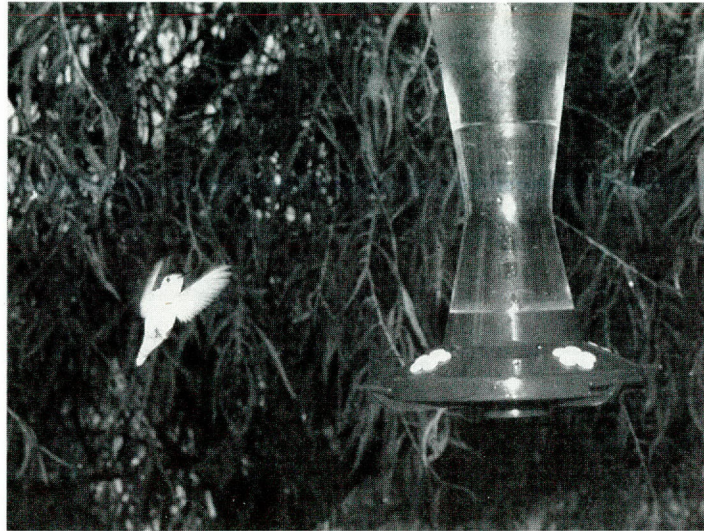
"I call her Weaver's White Hummingbird. She (I hate to say 'it') appeared the weekend of September 21-22, 1996. I saw her about 10 a.m. on Saturday. It took her a while to start feeding. She would fly up to the feeder and then back off for a while. I have these three feeders on my

front porch under the eaves and one in a tree outside the back door. Any time she was run off in the front she would go to the back one. There was a larger male guarding it but he would only let the white one drink."

1996 Most Common Species*

1. Ruby-throated (74%)
2. Black-chinned (32%)
3. Rufous (5%)

*Percentages of participants reporting species among those most commonly seen



Partially albino hummingbird in Fort Bend County. Photo courtesy of C. W. Embree

DID YOU KNOW...?



Hummingbirds (Trochilidae) represent the second largest family of birds in the western hemisphere (367 species)

The smallest warm-blooded vertebrate in the world, the Cuban "Bee" Hummingbird, is only 2.2 inches long

Some female hummingbirds place stones in one side of their nest to counterbalance their weight on the other side

Hummingbirds are the only birds in the world that can fly backward

The relatively largest breast muscles of all birds provide the power for the hummingbird's flight

Hummingbirds have the relatively largest brain of all birds

A hummingbird's heart rate is approximately 1260 beats per minute during normal activity and can slow to 50 beats per minute during torpor



TORPOR

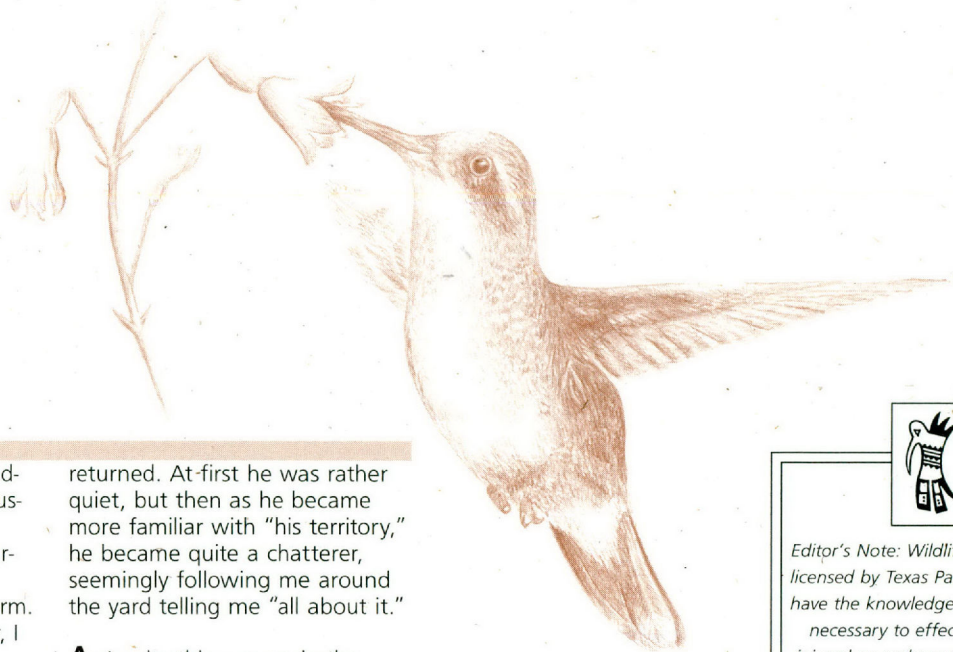
The hummingbird's unique flight requires much more energy than that of most birds. The body temperature of an active hummingbird is typically 40 degrees centigrade or higher. In fact, even at rest the metabolism of a hummingbird is 12 times higher than that of a pigeon. Their very rapid heartbeat and high metabolic rate require a great deal of energy – hence the hummingbird's special need for lots of sugar-rich foods.

Hummingbirds have reached some of the smallest sizes possible for warm-blooded animals because an animal any smaller probably could not eat enough each day to sustain its high metabolism. Small animals lose relatively more heat from their bodies than larger ones and for this reason, hummingbirds need

lots of fuel to keep them running all day. With such staggeringly high energy demands, how do these birds even make it through the night without food? The hummingbird has found the answer in *torpor*.

Torpor is a sleep-like state of reduced body temperature (hypothermia) and metabolism, which is entered into during the night or during colder periods of the year. During this time, the hummingbird's body temperature may be very close to that of the environment and its metabolism slows drastically. They are often perched perfectly still and will not fly away, even when approached. Some hummers even fall off of their perches during torpor – but can't move until they work up the energy to fly away.

If you suspect that a hummingbird is in torpor during the daytime due to cold temperatures, carefully record your observations and include them in your 1997 survey. In particular, we are interested in the climate conditions including temperature, time and % cloud cover that were present when the hummingbird was observed in torpor. In 1996, 10% of our Texas Hummingbird Roundup participants observed hummingbirds that appeared to be utilizing this method of energy conservation. The average air temperature recorded by participants who observed hummingbirds in torpor was 48°F. In addition, 75% of participants who reported climate conditions indicated that there was at least some cloud cover when torpor was observed.



T

ARCHIE

This is the story of a Broad-billed hummingbird that my husband named 'Archie.' Archie arrived October 6, 1996, apparently blown from his western Mexico home by a tropical storm. Being an amateur birdwatcher, I knew right away that a most unusual visitor had arrived at the feeder. He hung around for several days, so I decided I'd better get some help in identifying him, although I had had numerous close looks at him and felt that he was a Broad-billed. In a week or so, two San Antonio Audubon Society experts came out and identified him as a Broad-billed. I didn't realize what an exotic visitor I had, until the phone started ringing with many bird enthusiasts wanting to see him.

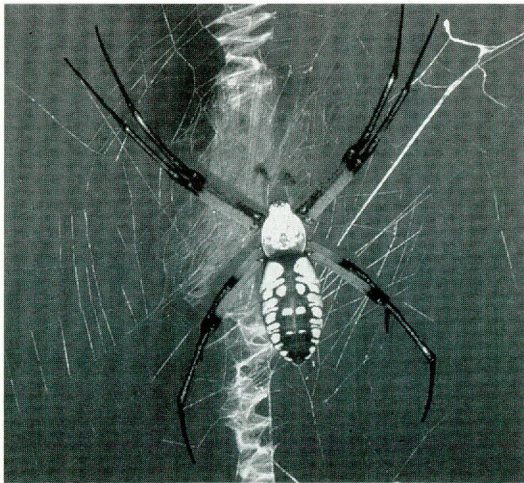
As time went on, he disappeared for up to 10 days at a time and then as the first northerners started arriving, he

returned. At first he was rather quiet, but then as he became more familiar with "his territory," he became quite a chatterer, seemingly following me around the yard telling me "all about it."

As I write this, we are in the throws of a severe cold spell and into our third day of ice and temperatures in the 20s. I have feared every morning that there would be no more Archie, but so far he's been waiting for me to put out a fresh feeder at dawn. For the rest of the day the feeders are changed at least every hour.

I am hopeful that Archie will survive the rest of the winter and eventually find his way back to his home. His beautiful turquoise and bluish plumage and red bill have been a real joy to me, and I wanted to share this birding adventure with others."

Susan Cage, Bexar County



Editor's Note: Wildlife rehabilitators, licensed by Texas Parks and Wildlife, have the knowledge and experience necessary to effectively care for injured or orphaned wildlife. If you encounter such an animal, please contact the Nongame and Urban Wildlife Program at (512) 389-4403, and we will provide you with the name of your nearest rehabilitator.

CAUGHT IN A TRAP

Flies, gnats, mosquitoes... but hummingbirds? Several of our 1996 Texas Hummingbird Roundup participants reported seeing hummingbirds caught in spiders' webs:

"...my daughter asked if we had heard some noises. We looked back to the porch and there were two hummers just seemingly suspended in the air. They had flown into a spider's web and were unable to get free. As we neared them they struggled, frantically trying to escape. My brother took them down and removed the web from around their wings and feet. They had lost some feathers and the wing of one was strained. I held that one close in my hands. My brother put the other bird in a hanging basket and it immediately flew away. I took the bird I was holding home with me. I offered it some food but it would not eat. I found a gallon jar, put some leaves in it so the hummer would have something to sit on and some sugar water. When I put the hummer into the jar it could just barely sit erect. After about half an hour the bird was beginning to move about some as I was leaving for a meeting. When I arrived home late that afternoon it was able to fly to the top of the jar and hover there for several seconds. I took the jar and bird outside and removed the cloth I had over the mouth of the jar. Within a

few seconds, realizing it had a chance to escape, it lifted itself out of the jar and flew away. That was a beautiful sight!"

Rosin Watkins, Coryell County

"Observed hummer trapped in large spider web. I was able to break the web and, holding the tiny creature in my hand, its heart beating frantically, I unraveled the silk from around its wings. It seemed stunned for a time but eventually was able to fly."

Richard and Penni Hagan, Cameron County

"One incident this summer that amused many people that happened to be in the office at the time was a female Black-chinned that had something hanging off of one of her legs. There was a lady here that stood by the feeder for a long time until she caught her and we very gently cut it away as close as we dared. Off she went, none the worse for the wear and stayed on for several months, finally losing the last of the load. It appeared to be a big clump of spider web about three inches long."

Lost Maples State Natural Area staff, Bander County



D HUMMINGBIRD NESTS

Perhaps more than any other birds, male hummingbirds shirk all responsibilities when it comes to parental duties. Female hummingbirds are typically left on their own when they begin building their tiny nests each spring. The following are some descriptions of typical nests for selected Texas hummingbird species:

Species	Nest description
White-eared	found in crotch of trees
Calliope	clump of pine cone material
Black-chinned	saddled, cup-shaped appearance
Blue-throated	hanging, cylindrical appearance
Costa's	doubly supported construction

Hummingbirds typically have low rates of nesting success due to predation, weather and other factors. For example, Black-chinned Hummingbirds, one of our most common Texas species, had only 32% nesting success in one study*. In 1996, 6% of Texas Hummingbird Roundup participants reported observing a hummingbird nest. Most of these nests (58%), were built at a height of 6-10 feet and contained one (53%) or two (40%) pea-sized eggs.

*Johnsgard, Paul A. 1983. *The Hummingbirds of North America*. Smithsonian Inst. Press, Washington, D.C.



PROFILE OF A ROUNDUP PARTICIPANT

We found that our Hummingbird Roundup participants live in the country as well as the city, and are experienced hummingbirders. When we asked our 1996 Texas Hummingbird Roundup participants whether they considered their residence to be rural or urban, the answers were split fairly evenly. Just over half of our participants (53%) reported that their property was in an urban area. On the other hand, nearly the same number (47%) reported rural living. Roundup participants have been watching hummingbirds for an average of seven years and one participant reported observing hummingbirds at the same location for the past 53 years!

ON RED DYES

Is it necessary to add red coloring to your sugar solution to attract hummingbirds? In short, the answer is **NO**. The Texas Hummingbird Roundup strongly discourages using either commercial or homemade nectar solutions that contain red dyes. Adding red dye to your hummingbird food is certainly unnecessary and potentially harmful.

Of our 1996 Texas Hummingbird Roundup participants, only 17% reported using red coloring in their sugar solution. For the 1997 Roundup, our goal is to reduce that percentage to zero. Since there is currently insufficient scientific data concerning the health effects of many types of red dyes on hummingbirds, we feel that nectar solutions containing these color additives should be avoided. Furthermore, after three years of gathering data on Texas hummingbirds from our devoted participants all over the state, our research indicates that clear, homemade, sugar solutions are effective for attracting hummingbirds as long as they are contained in a feeder that has some red color on its surface.

It should also be noted that the sugar solution that you place in your feeder should be replaced *at least once per week*. Replac-

ing old nectar and cleaning the feeder cannot be done often enough as harmful microbes will grow in your feeder within a matter of days in the hot Texas sun. Bacteria and fungi are toxic to hummingbirds at sufficient levels and frequent cleaning of your feeder is the best preventive measure that you can take to keep your hummingbirds healthy. We are pleased to report that 86% of our 1996 Roundup participants reported cleaning their feeders every 2-6 days. **The Texas Hummingbird Roundup recommends cleaning your feeder every 2-3 days, particularly in hot weather.**

Preparing your own hummingbird food using the recipe printed below can be an enjoyable, inexpensive method of ensuring that the sugar solution that you provide for them is safe and beneficial. In 1996, 88% of our participants reported using the recommended 4:1 water:sugar ratio. We encourage everyone to use this mixture of sugar solution since this most closely approximates the glucose concentration in the nectar of their preferred plants. The hummingbirds have enough to worry about with Loggerhead shrikes, hawks and neighborhood cats – let's make sure that the food we put out for them is not their enemy, too.

NEW BOOKS ON HUMMINGBIRDS

Arm yourself with three new weapons for understanding and identifying hummingbirds:

Nancy Newfield and Barbara Nielsen's new book, *Hummingbird Gardens*, provides information on a broad range of related subjects including hummingbird species, their preferred nectar sources and specific tips for all the major regions of the U.S. Autographed copies are available from the author. Send your check or money order to: Nancy Newfield (nl01@www.gnofn.org), Casa Colibri, 3016 45th Street, Metairie, LA 70001. Be sure to include your name, address, city, state, zip code and a note as to whom the book should be inscribed. Hardcover \$34.95 plus \$3 S&H. Softcover \$19.95 plus \$3 S&H.

Smithsonian Institution Press will publish a new edition of the most comprehensive, detailed account of hummingbird biology, *Hummingbirds of North America*, by noted ornithologist Paul A. Johnsgard. Thoroughly describes comparative biology, evolution, anatomy, ecology and behavior of all North American species. Available in June. To order, call the publisher at 1-800-782-4612.

A Quick Reference Guide to Texas Hummingbirds, by Jereme Phillips, Texas Parks and Wildlife Nongame and Urban Program, contains identification tips for all eighteen species and updated range maps – based partly on your observations! Additional copies available. Send a postcard to Texas Hummingbird Roundup, TPWD, 4200 Smith School Rd., Austin, TX 78744.



Recipe for Making Your Own Hummingbird Food

Ingredients: 4 parts water, 1 part sugar
Directions: Bring water to boil, stir in sugar, and boil for 2-3 minutes. Let cool and store excess in refrigerator.
Reminders: Do **not** substitute with honey. Feeders should be cleaned and refilled every few days, and remember it is necessary to clean the feeder more frequently during the warmer months than in the winter.

1994-1997 PARTICIPANTS

The Nongame and Urban Wildlife Program would like to recognize the following people who are participants for the fourth year of the Texas Hummingbird Roundup. We apologize for any names that may have been erroneously omitted from this list and we would like to express our sincere gratitude for the dedicated efforts of all of our Roundup participants. Please stay with us and always send in those survey forms!



9th Annual HUMMER/BIRD CELEBRATION September 11-14, 1997 Rockport/Fulton, Texas

The Texas Hummingbird Roundup joins the Rockport/Fulton Chamber of Commerce in inviting everyone to attend the 1997 Hummer/Bird Celebration. This is a unique opportunity to view thousands of hummingbirds as they begin their fall migration back to their wintering grounds in Mexico and Central America. In addition, seminars, booths, field trips and workshops will offer opportunities to learn more about many species of Texas birds.

Topics at the Hummer/Bird Celebration include shorebird identification, purple martin management, birding by ear, nature photography, hummingbird rehabilitation, and much, much more. Some of the most renowned ornithologists and amateur birders will present programs that provide unique educational opportunities for birders. Children's workshops will also be held at the festival which provide the chance for kids to see live hummingbirds, raptors and other wildlife up close.

For more information about the 9th Annual Hummer/Bird Celebration, contact the Rockport/Fulton Area Chamber of Commerce at 1-800-826-6441.

- | | | |
|--|--|--|
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Nueces County | Ronald and Vicktoria Resech
Travis County |
| John and Ann Appleton
Howard County | Jean F. Jones
Austin County | Ruth E. Rutledge
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