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2010 / Spring



THE TEXAS

HUMMER

SPRING 2010

A NEWSLETTER FOR TEXAS HUMMINGBIRD ROUNDUP PARTICIPANTS

HUMMINGBIRD ROUNDUP 2009

Hummingbird watchers in Texas were once again treated to near-full diversity with the return of the Green-breasted Mango to the state. Seventeen species were reported throughout the 99 counties from which we received reports. The only species not reported in 2009 was the Berylline Hummingbird, despite most of the state not breaking the drought until early fall.

Observer numbers were up considerably this year, with 354 individuals reporting from various periods from the 99 counties. The Lucifer Hummingbird pins are ordered and will be mailed as soon as they arrive. The 2010 pin will be the Buff-bellied Hummingbird—a Rio Grande Valley specialty that is rapidly expanding into Central and East Texas.

Workshops have been down a little in recent years, primarily due to travel costs and budget limitations. They can still be

planned for 2010–2011 if you can find locations that will bring a good number of people to discuss hummingbirds and their habitats.

Diversity across the state remained high. Our leaders this year were not surprising—Jeff Davis County with 12 species and Brewster County with 11. Interestingly, in these two counties we had no reports of either unknown or genera-only (R/A) birds. Other regions of the state reported good diversity as well. In Southeast Texas, Harris County reported eight distinct species, while surrounding counties of Fort Bend (five species), Galveston (five species) and Montgomery (four species) were quite diverse. It should be noted that most of this diversity is seen during the winter months! In Central Texas, Bastrop County reported seven species, while surrounding counties of Travis (six species) and Hays (five species) did quite well. Travis County did not report a Green Violet-ear this year but did



record Buff-bellied Hummingbirds, while Hays County shocked us with great photos of a Green-breasted Mango! The Green Violet-ear seemed to stay a little farther west this year, with great photos and reports from Kerr County (five species). Neighboring Kendall County reported the Broad-billed to also turn in five species. In the Panhandle, Lubbock County turned in six species including a Blue-throated Hummingbird.

There were some surprises carried into the 2010 season. An adult male Calliope Hummingbird was reported at Zilker Garden in Austin in late winter 2009. In early spring 2010, reports from the same feeder in the same park included an adult male Calliope Hummingbird. Could this have been the same bird? We will never know with certainty since it was not banded.

We are still trying to roll out updates on the Web site, although changing Web site formats has prevented this in 2009. Hopefully we can get ongoing updates in the near future.

As a reminder, very rare birds like Berylline, Violet-crowned, Costa's, White-eared and Green-breasted Mango—as well as those of that elusive 19th Texas species—should always be accompanied with a good description and a photo. A record should also be sent to the Texas Bird Records Committee through mark.lockwood@tpwd.state.tx.us



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IDENTIFICATION TIPS

DIFFERENCE IS MORE THAN FEATHER-DEEP!

Hummingbirds of the genus *Amazilia* are very similar in appearance. Two species, the Berylline Hummingbird (*A. beryllina*) and the Buff-bellied Hummingbird (*A. yucatanensis*) are generally accepted as being species that have occurred in Texas. A third species, the Rufous-tailed Hummingbird (*A. tzacatl*) is unconfirmed from the state, with specimens being lost or very poorly documented sight records. We will work with the two confirmed species.

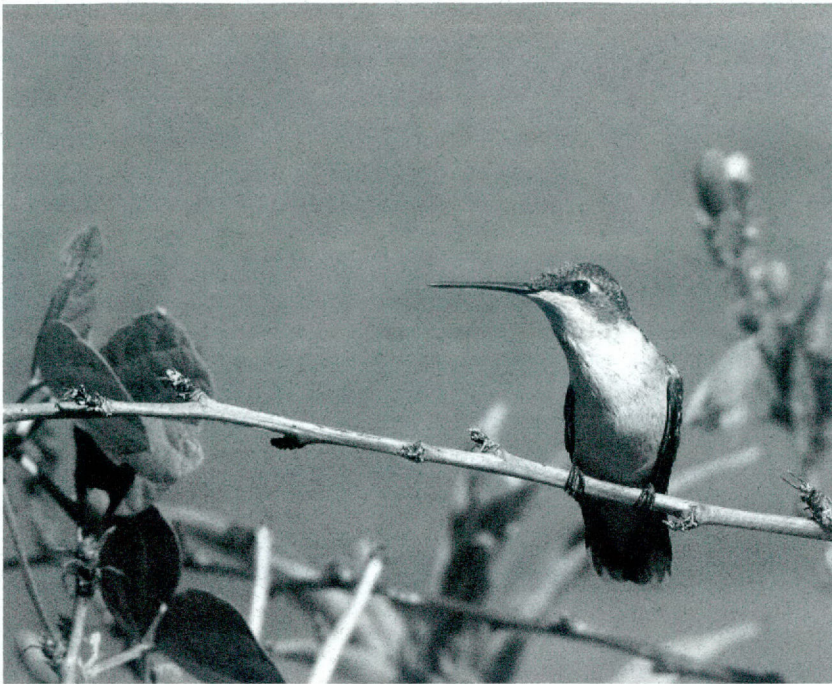
One of the key differences in these species does not relate to appearance at all, but rather to the habitat these birds are likely to be found in. The Buff-bellied Hummingbird is a thorn scrub bird of the coastal areas of Texas. It is often found in oak woodlands and palmetto forests, as well as gardens and orchards. Their nests are often found in oak mottes and thickets on the Gulf Coast. This bird is a lowland bird that seems to be expanding its range, but generally in the lowland areas of the southeastern United States. The Berylline Hummingbird, on the other hand, is a bird of the mountains, generally above the 3,000-foot level of the southwestern United States. While it may move to lower elevations during the nonbreeding season, it is a bird of deciduous forests and pine-oak woodlands, canyons and thickets. This elevation and habitat differential is significant and should be considered in identification efforts when the two birds are possible.

In appearance the birds are similar, but there are significant differences that allow us to differentiate them visually in the field. The green "bib" of the Berylline Hummingbird is much more extensive than that of the Buff-bellied Hummingbird, extending down into the breast area. The belly color of the two birds is different, with the Buff-bellied being a bright, sandy buff color to medium grayish buff, while that of the Berylline is fawn to brownish-gray. The wings of the Berylline Hummingbird have a distinct band of cinnamon to rufous coloration through the secondaries that is absent in the dark wings of the Buff-bellied. The rump of the Berylline Hummingbird is more purplish, while that of the Buff-bellied is cinnamon to rufous.

The big difference between the two birds occurs in the tail, though. The square to slightly notched tail of the Berylline Hummingbird is a dark rufous brown with a strong purple hue to it. The tail of a Buff-bellied Hummingbird varies in shape from square to deeply notched depending on age and gender of the bird. These feathers are generally rufous washed with a golden green to bronze hue but no purple present.

The bills of these two birds are very different as adult males, though juveniles and females may be somewhat similar. Where the adult male Buff-bellied bill is red with a black tip, the upper mandible of an adult male Berylline Hummingbird is black, while the lower mandible is red with a black tip.

Seeing either of these birds is a great treat. By looking carefully, considering the location (am I in the mountains or on the plains) and looking for the distinguishing characteristics, we should not confuse the common Buff-bellied Hummingbird with the rare but beautiful Berylline.



SOME INTERESTING REPORTS FROM BANDING STUDIES

A considerable amount of money and effort is spent each year banding birds in an attempt to learn more about their movements, habitats and life history. It is always interesting to look at some of these records and try to piece together what we can learn from it. While these are fragmentary reports, here are some interesting notes I have received from past banding reports.

A Black-chinned Hummingbird banded in Leakey (Real County) in October 2006 was recaptured in Comfort (Kendall County), just 67 miles away, in June 2008.

A Ruby-throated Hummingbird banded in Christoval (Tom Green County) in September 2007 was recaptured in Minnesota in August 2008.

A Ruby-throated Hummingbird banded in Louisiana in September 2007 was recaptured in Pearland in September 2008, just 234 miles southeast of the original banding location.

A Ruby-throated Hummingbird banded at Rockport (Aransas County) in September 2006 was recaptured in Georgia in July 2008.

And for longevity, a Ruby-throated Hummingbird banded at Christoval in August 2004 was recaptured in Oklahoma in July 2008, four years later.

We do not know which of these records represent recoveries (bands turned in from dead birds) or recaptures, so I have treated them all as recaptures. Thanks to Brent Ortego with the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department in Victoria for sharing these with us.

A HEADS UP TO ALL OBSERVERS

While this is to all observers, it is of immediate concern to those in the Houston and San Antonio regions, where this pest has been positively identified.

On October 15, I received confirmation that ants swarming a hummingbird feeder at Sheldon Lake State Park in the Houston area had positively been identified as the Raspberry Crazy Ant. This ant, first reported in Texas by a pest control agent in the Houston area is an invasive species, much like the red fire ant. They are amazingly persistent in returning to look for food at sites where it has been previously noted. Biologists at Sheldon Lake report that the only thing that seems to work is removing the feeder, and that only temporarily if the feeder is replaced.

Wildlife impacts (and swarming a food source would certainly constitute an impact) are being tracked by Texas Parks and Wildlife Department. Please see http://www.tpwd.state.tx.us/publications/pwdforms/media/pwd_1241_w7000_raspberry_crazy_ant_wl_impact.doc to report impacts. For more information on this ant please see http://urbanentomology.tamu.edu/ants/exotic_tx.cfm





OBSERVERS' COMMENTS

This page is set aside for comments from those of you participating in the Roundup and for responses from Roundup staff.

An observer in Kendall County commented:

“Had a wonderful time banding in Arizona, so watching for bands is high on my mind during observations.”

We have several opportunities at which people can observe banding in Texas. Most notable would be the annual Hummer-Bird Celebration at Rockport, or the Hummer Xtravaganza at Gulf Coast Bird Observatory in Lake Jackson. These events are always memorable.

An observer in Milam County comments:

“Observed a female RTHU dive-bomb a male Northern Cardinal. She then flew onto her nest located about 25–30 feet from my deck.”

Like any animal, these birds are very protective of the nest and will defend it when they see a threat. The cardinal was obviously viewed as a threat by this bird.

An observer in Harris County wrote:

“Adding trees, bushes, shrubs and creating micro-habitats really helped increase my total number of birds. Now one bird doesn’t dominate all my feeders.”

I think he said it all!

A Montgomery County observer says:

“One afternoon while walking through our yard, I heard a hummer “squeaking” in distress. I found it caught in the garden spider’s web.”

Spiders are one of many dangers these birds deal with on a daily basis. The hummingbird does however need the spider's web if it is going to produce a nest, and so we can not remove all webs.

This was again a year of divergent experiences:

From Wichita County came the comment:

“I had a bad year because of ant infestation and wasps. Was constantly moving the feeder.”

Meanwhile, Medina County reported:

“At the morning and evening feeds I have had so many hummers ... it’s impossible to count them all at the 18 to 20 feeders I have spread throughout the property. Love it!”

And from Washington County:

“Had lots of birds. My daughter-in-law wouldn’t even go on the patio.”

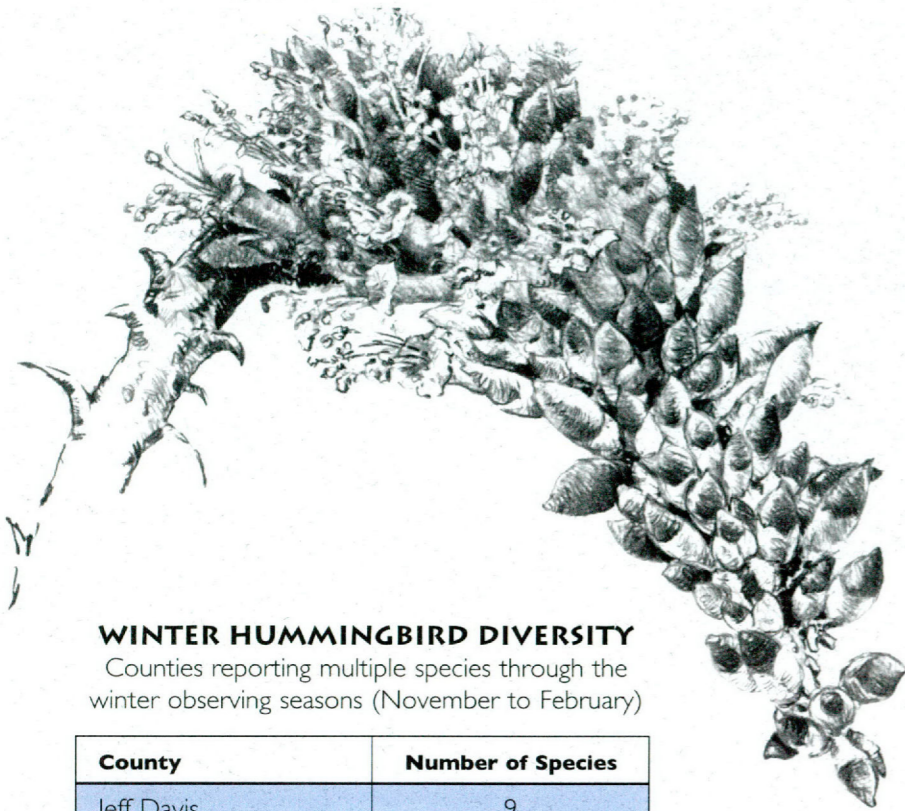
Not sure why your daughter-in-law wouldn't go on the patio; everyone enjoys hummingbirds!

From Bandera County came a question:

“If hummingbirds are “pestering” other species up in the trees, could they be protecting a nest or just being territorial?”

And the answer to that, without more information, is it is impossible to say for certain. Generally, when a bird begins to “pester” and bother other species, it is because they are trying to move the other species out of the area — protecting a valuable resource. This resource could be a nest, and probably is in this case, but could also be the insects or a nectar source the bird has been using.





WINTER HUMMINGBIRD DIVERSITY

Counties reporting multiple species through the winter observing seasons (November to February)

| County | Number of Species |
|------------|-------------------|
| Jeff Davis | 9 |
| Harris | 7 |
| Brewster | 6 |
| Hidalgo | 6 |
| Bastrop | 5 |
| Galveston | 5 |
| Victoria | 5 |
| Fort Bend | 4 |
| Hays | 4 |
| Kendall | 4 |
| Lubbock | 4 |
| Bandera | 3 |
| Bexar | 3 |
| Comal | 3 |
| DeWitt | 3 |
| Montgomery | 3 |
| Uvalde | 3 |
| Wilson | 3 |

Most northern county reporting hummingbirds in either January–February or November–December was Parmer County, reporting a Black-chinned Hummingbird in both November and December.

PLANT PREFERENCE FOR 2009

| Plant Species | Percent of Observers Reporting |
|----------------------------|--------------------------------|
| Salvias (assorted species) | 19.5% |
| Turk's Cap | 8.3% |
| Lantana | 5.7% |
| Trumpet Vine | 4.4% |
| Coral Honeysuckle | 3.3% |
| Hamelia* | 2.9% |
| Crossvine | 2.7% |
| Hibiscus* | 2.1% |
| Shrimp Plant* | 2.1% |

*non-native

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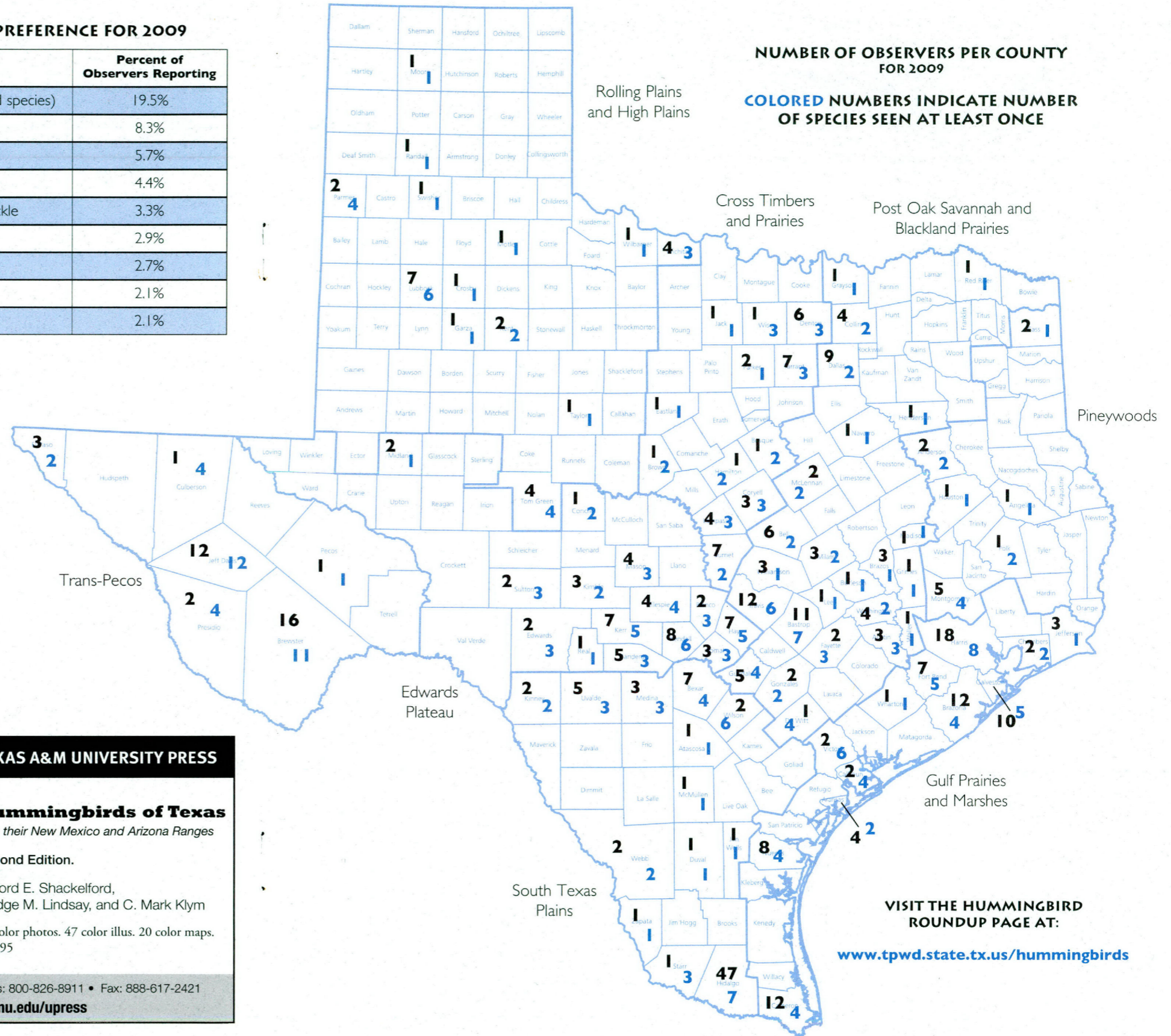
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FESTIVALS

A new hummingbird festival this year in McAllen, Texas, did not come about. They were trying a spring date in April, and they simply did not have support. If they try it again, I would urge you all to consider it. Spring in the valley can see lots of Buff-bellied and Black-chinned hummingbirds along with Ruby-throated and Black-chinned hummingbirds left over from winter and even a few Rufous. This is also the season when some rarities have shown up, most notably Green-breasted Mangos.

Xtreme Hummingbird Xtravaganza looks like it is going to be September 11 this year. This event on the Texas coast features hummingbird banding and the unusual opportunity to "adopt a hummingbird." The festival is held each weekend in September at the grounds of the Gulf Coast Bird Observatory in Lake Jackson, Texas.

The annual **Hummer-Bird Celebration** in Rockport is scheduled for September 16-20 this year. This is a big event, always attended by a lot of hummingbirds and hummingbird enthusiasts alike. Programs, banding and a vendor's market are among the features, but my favorite is getting out and visiting the "hummer homes" where the Ruby-throated and Buff-bellied never fail to entertain.

The following weekend, September 25, Kleb Woods in Houston will hold another hummingbird festival. Last year's event featured banding, and programs and plans are in place for a similar event.

With such a variety of events there are plenty of opportunities to view hummingbirds in Texas.



A NEW WAY FOR SCHOOLS TO GET INVOLVED

This month I had the pleasure of visiting with the fourth-grade science class at Carver Center in Midland, Texas. These youngsters are excited about observing hummingbirds in the school courtyard (which would leave most gardeners envious!) and sharing some of their data with the Hummingbird Roundup. In addition to the basic occurrence and habitat data, the class is going to monitor five behaviors: feeding (at a feeder), nectaring (at plants), hawking insects, aggression and the territorial displays. They are going to be recording the time spent at these events and the gender/age cohort of those involved. This should produce some interesting data that can be built on over subsequent seasons.

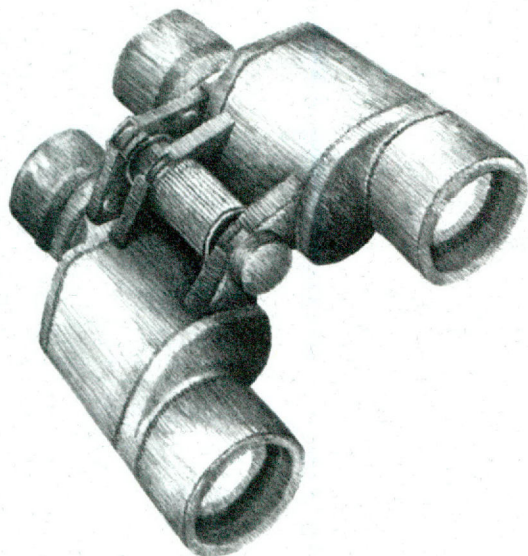
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OBSERVATION TIPS

“I have seen the Black-chinned hummingbirds gathering little white stuff (perhaps the seed) from a weed in my yard. I had the plant identified by the United States’ Agriculture Department Consolidated Farm Service Agency at Rocksprings, Texas. The agent said the plant is called Sow Thistle or by the name, Prickley Thistle. The hummingbirds have been diligently gathering and flying away with it. Perhaps to line their nests? I saw another small bird, perhaps a finch type, gathering it also. It would sit there and spit some out; then get some more. Then flew off with what it gathered.”

As the observer suspected, this bird was probably gathering materials to line a nest, and this is one of the best times to “find” the hummingbird nest. While we do not encourage you to disrupt the nest, careful observation from a distance will probably reveal this female (by the way, guys, it is always going to be the female—males do not assist at the nest at all) flying to the same general area of the tree or shrub. She will not fly directly to the nest—not wanting to lead predators to where her valuable treasure will be, but she will fly to the same general area. Looking at the forks of branches nearby may yield a nest observation.

The data we can use on nests are:

- ☞ Type of plant it was in (tree, shrub)
- ☞ Height above ground
- ☞ Were there eggs present (please, do not disturb the nest to determine this)
- ☞ Were there nestlings or young present
- ☞ Did you see young fledge from the nest
- ☞ Was the nest used for a second nesting

This data is all asked for on the second page of your survey.



To join the Hummingbird Roundup, please send a \$6 donation with your name, address, county, telephone number and e-mail address to:
Hummingbird Roundup,
Texas Parks and Wildlife Department
4200 Smith School Road
Austin, TX 78744

Please remember to return your Roundup 2010 survey forms by **Jan. 21, 2011**, to the address above.

MISSION STATEMENT



The mission of the 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, 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 Wildlife Diversity Program in its mission to keep these tiny visitors returning each year.