

Backyard Birding Guides

#8 - Hummingbirds

by Chuck Otte

K-State Research and Extension - Geary County Extension Office

For years people have been fascinated with hummingbirds. These winged jewels are in a class by themselves when it comes to aerial wizardry. In fact no other bird species can hover and fly backwards like hummingbirds can.

Kansas Hummingbird History

Historically, it was known that Ruby-throated Hummingbirds could be found across Kansas and would nest sporadically, primarily in the eastern part of the state. Any other hummingbird species was a rare occurrence and considered a lost vagrant. Even as recently as 1965 in *A Directory of the Birds of Kansas*, Johnston lists just two hummingbirds. The Ruby-throated Hummingbird was described as, "Uncommon transient and summer resident east, rare in west." and Calliope Hummingbird was described as, "Rare transient in west. One record... Morton County."

Since that time, however, we have discovered that there are more species of hummingbirds spread across a greater area of Kansas than we had previously thought. The checklist, *Birds of Kansas*, maintained by the Kansas Ornithological Society, now list nine species of hummingbirds with at least one verified record in Kansas. By far, the greatest diversity of species is in the western third of the state, but even in central and eastern Kansas there are now records of several species of hummingbirds. Individuals with good backyard habitat and well maintained feeders in western Kansas should not be surprised if they have four or five species annually.

Species

With the exception of the Ruby-throated Hummingbird, most of the North American hummingbirds are western species preferring the mountainous western United States and Canada or the desert southwest. The Ruby-throated Hummingbird migrates through in the spring, mid-April to mid-May, with a few lingering to nest. Numbers of Ruby-throats are highest in the late summer and fall, when southbound migrants move in and linger before departing for southerly wintering areas. Likewise, a majority of the species and individuals that are seen are southbound migrants in August, September and October. This can sometimes make identification difficult as males may have lost some of their distinctive breeding plumage. Females and immature birds of different species can appear very similar. The hummingbirds currently listed on the Kansas checklist are: Magnificent; Ruby-throated; Black-chinned; Anna's; Costa's; Calliope; Broad-tailed; Rufous; and Allen's.

Hummingbirds depend on two sources of food: flower nectar and insects. While homeowners find it difficult to provide insects, it is quite simple to provide artificial nectar (sugar syrup) and flowers. *Backyard Birding Guide #6* includes a comprehensive list of flowering plants that are attractive to hummingbirds. Basically, any flowering plant that has a trumpet-style flower and is in the red/orange sector of the color spectrum will be quite attractive to hummingbirds.

Feeders

Hummingbird feeders are becoming more common in yards and in stores. Simply hanging a hummingbird feeder in your backyard does not guarantee that you will have hummingbirds visit it. But if you have attractive, bird-friendly landscaping, flowers that appeal to hummingbirds, and a hummingbird feeder, you should have some success in attracting hummingbirds.

Hummingbird feeders come in numerous designs and styles, all of which are designed to dispense sugar water. Most feeders, if not entirely red, will have some red on them. This is somewhat important as hummingbirds will be attracted to the color red. Select a feeder that is easy to fill, take apart and clean. Cleaning is important, as the sugar water will start to spoil in a week or less in warm weather.

There are commercial mixes available to make your sugar water or artificial nectar. Many of these have a red dye included to make the sugar water red. It is generally considered that this is not necessary. You can make a simple sugar water solution by dissolving one part sugar in four parts water. Heat this solution to boiling and boil for a minute or two. This helps get all the sugar into solution and also sterilizes the solution so it won't spoil as quickly. Allow the solution to cool before placing in the feeder.

Once the sugar water starts to turn cloudy, or every three to five days, empty the feeder, clean it and fill it with new sugar water. The sugar water can spoil and become unattractive to the hummingbirds.

To try to attract spring migrants, hummingbird feeders should be filled and in place by mid- April. If you had no activity by late May or early June you may just want to take the feeder down until early August. South bound migration usually starts in late July or early August. Once migrants move in to an area, they may stay for a day, a week or a

month. Many hummingbird feeder watchers indicate that August and September are their best months.

As summer wanes and we move into fall, some feeder watchers will express concern about whether they need to move their feeders inside to encourage the hummingbirds to move on south. This is not generally considered necessary. Hummingbirds are much hardier than we often realize. One case a few years ago in southern Kansas, documented an Anna's Hummingbird that kept coming to a feeder into late February. The morning that a large snow storm was to move into the area, it fed an extra long time at the feeder before leaving, never to be seen again. If there is freezing weather and hummingbirds are still coming to your feeder, simply bring it in at night, fill it with fresh sugar water in the morning and put it out at sun up. When the hummingbirds quit feeding for the year it is time to bring it in. In January, 2000 it was discovered that an Anna's Hummingbird had been coming to a Salina feeder throughout the fall and winter. In general, if it is after November, and you still have a hummingbird coming to your feeder, it is probably not a Ruby-throated Hummingbird. If this occurs, you are encouraged to contact the author, or other area birders so that this bird can be identified and documented.

Our knowledge of hummingbirds in Kansas continues to change. As more homeowners create hummingbird friendly landscapes and maintain feeders, we will gather more information on species and their distribution in Kansas.

For more information contact:

Chuck Otte
Geary County Extension Agent
PO Box 28
Junction City, Kansas 66441
Telephone: 785-238-4161
E-mail: cotte@ksu.edu

March 2008

Kansas State University Agricultural Experiment Station and Cooperative Extension Service, Manhattan, Kansas

It is the policy of Kansas State University Agricultural Experiment Station and Cooperative Extension Service that all persons shall have equal opportunity and access to its education programs, services, activities, and materials without regard to race, color, religion, national origin, sex, age, or disability. Kansas State University is an equal opportunity organization. These materials may be available in alternative formats.

Issued in furtherance of Cooperative Extension Work, Acts of May 8 and June 30, 1914, as amended. Kansas State University, County Extension Councils, Extension Districts, and United States Department of Agriculture Cooperating, Fred A. Cholick, Director.