

A Magical Season of Hummingbirds

By Laura Keene, Avid birder and photographer. A clinical pharmacist by profession, in 2016 she followed her dream and did an ABA Big Year, in which she set a record of 792 photographed species

Few birds capture our attention and inspire awe the way hummingbirds can. They seem to defy gravity as they exhibit skills other birds can't match. Their acrobatics include hovering to feed at flowers and aerial battles with flips and turns at dizzying speeds. They can even fly backwards and upside down. So tiny,



Anna's Hummingbird in a tree

but while their delicate structure makes them appear fragile, they are fierce defenders of feeders and flowers they deem "theirs," chasing away other hummingbirds, butterflies, and even larger birds who dare to land in their tree.

Fall hummingbird activity brings chaos and much joy to my south Texas backyard. An average year will see large numbers of hummingbirds filtering through during migration, keeping me on my toes as I work to provide clean feeders filled with fresh sugar water. I use a standard 4:1 water-to-sugar mix and avoid any red food coloring. As our nesting Black-chinned Hummingbirds begin to head south, they are simultaneously replaced by migrants from the north, including Ruby-throated Hummingbirds, a common species found in the eastern U.S. The numbers build until I am feeding hundreds a day, and then numbers wane as the days grow shorter, and by mid-November I am left with only a few Rufous Hummingbirds that might stay through the winter.



Black-chinned Hummingbird



Hummingbirds at the feeders

Fall of 2020 was filled with uncertainty as the global COVID-19 pandemic worsened, but the hummingbird activity remained a constant. One afternoon in October, as I watched their daily antics, my thoughts drifted to what I was missing. I yearned for those irreplaceable hugs from my grandkids. We had decided to forego all holiday visits with our family in Ohio to ensure everyone's safety with the increasing threat of soaring infection rates. My attention snapped back to the present with a start when I realized I was watching something different. I was thrilled to see a Broad-tailed Hummingbird hovering by the red salvia I had planted this spring. This species, with a bright green back and rosy red throat, spends its summers nesting in high elevation areas in the western U.S. While some will migrate through the westernmost part of Texas, it is a rare bird for my area.



Broad-tailed Hummingbird

In the days that followed, several Rufous Hummingbirds found the yard. Slightly smaller, but with the biggest attitudes, they can be the most aggressive of the bunch. Unless it is a shiny copper adult male, these require very close study to differentiate from Allen's Hummingbird, which breed along the Pacific Coast. Only the sharpest of photos of spread tail feathers will reveal the species with certainty, so my spare time was spent trying to capture that perfect shot until I could identify each individual. A few weeks later, I was amazed when a tiny Calliope Hummingbird, the smallest breeding bird in the U.S., found our flowers. The very same day, an Allen's Hummingbird took command of a feeder, chasing away every other hummingbird who came close with a vengeance.



Rufous Hummingbird

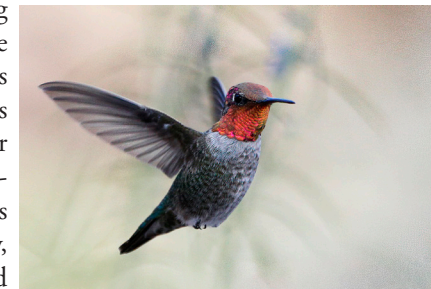


Allen's Hummingbird



Calliope Hummingbird

Days were getting shorter, and the hummingbird numbers were dwindling as they continued their southward migration. One day as I was working by a window, a larger hummingbird suddenly appeared at a nearby feeder, with iridescent reddish pink feathers on not just the throat, but also on the head. It was an Anna's Hummingbird, the most common species of hummingbird on the west coast, and the first to be reported in my Texas county! Over the next week, several more Anna's visited the feeders, and careful study of my photos revealed at least five individuals. I was not alone, as multiple Anna's were reported across the state of Texas, and beyond. It is unknown what caused these birds to venture so far east this year, but speculation includes the unusually severe drought conditions and wildfires in the western states.

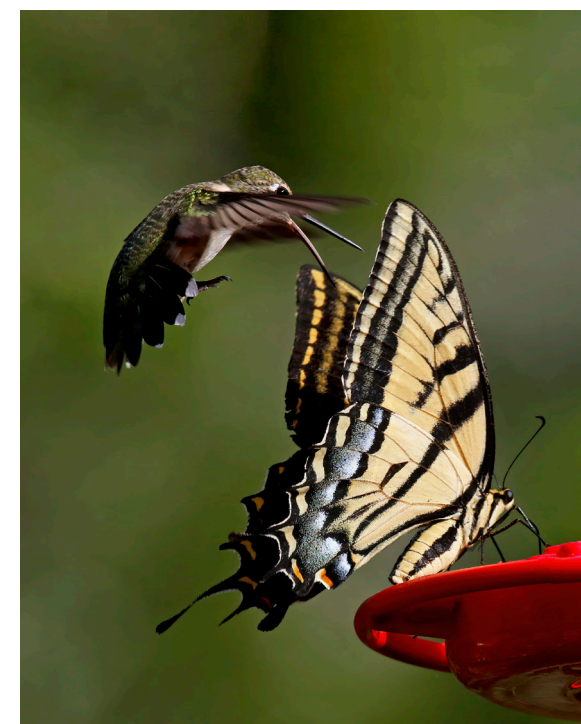


Anna's Hummingbird



Black-chinned Hummingbird

I find myself reflecting. If it were a typical year, would I have been home as much to observe my yard birds? And if not, would I have missed some of these gorgeous rarities? It was such a gift to have seven species of hummingbirds in my very own back yard in 2020, and while it will always be remembered as a year of loss and sacrifice, I will always treasure these tiny gems that brightened each and every day. ❖



Ruby-throated Hummingbird



Anna's Hummingbird



Rufous Hummingbird