

## Species Profile...

### Hummingbirds in the Rockies

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It was dusk on a recent July day at Estes Park, Colorado. My wife and I were watching hummingbirds at the home of Susan and John Ward. Dozens upon dozens of gorgeous little hummers were zipping past our heads and sipping nectar from feeders within three feet of us.

Susan Ward had graciously invited us to her home to watch three of the most charming species of North America's western hummingbirds: the elegant calliope, the pugnacious rufous, and the snappy broad-tailed. All three species gather in large numbers during July at Ward's hummingbird feeders.

Two of the hummers, the calliope and the rufous, begin their fall migration in July from the northern Rockies and the Pacific Northwest. Their southbound route takes them through the southern Colorado Rockies, and fortunately for us, to the Ward's home in Estes Park. The broad-tailed hummer nests in the western mountains from Texas to Colorado, and begins migrating south in late July. What all this means is that Mrs. Ward enjoys a July feeding frenzy of hummers at her home. And we got to enjoy the frenzy with her.

"I've been getting about 50 hummingbirds every afternoon," Ward said. "I've been going through two and one-half quarts of syrup a day in my feeders." Ward moved her four feeders to different spots on her deck so that my wife could photograph the shimmering feathers of the hummers from varying angles of light.

A calliope hummer perched on Ward's finger as she held a feeder in her hand. Another calliope perched on a deck railing next to my elbow and cocked its head as if to ask, "Why are you messing with my feeders?"

Measuring three inches long, the length of an average person's forefinger, the calliope hummingbird holds the record as the smallest bird in North America. I may have seen mosquitoes in Texas coastal marshes that were bigger than calliope hummers.

But the calliope's tiny size belies its hardiness. It nests in the rugged northwest mountainous regions of the Sierra Nevada and the Canadian Rockies, sometimes at elevations of 11,000 feet. It's a tough little bird that can withstand cold summer nights in the high mountain altitudes. Calliope's migrate from the Northern Rockies down to the central Mexican states of Michoacan and Guerrero for the winter, a distance of some 2,400 miles.

The scientific name for the calliope hummingbird is *Stellula calliope*, the first word being Latin for "little star" and the second word referring to Calliopeia, the Greek muse of epic poetry. Perfect name for a pretty hummer. The male has metallic green feathers on its back and glistening purple-red feathers that stream down its throat from a white gorget.

The rufous hummingbird is also small, not quite four inches in length. Perhaps its coppery color signifies its aggressive character.



The feisty little hummer often bullies and outmaneuvers other hummers at feeding stations. However, its belligerence was held in check by the strength in numbers of calliope and broad-tailed hummers at Susan Ward's home.

Rufous hummers nest in the Pacific Northwest in coniferous forests and mountain meadows. They migrate south to central Mexico and possibly as far as Panama. Many spend the winter on the Texas coast, and visit feeders in Houston from November through January.

The scientific name for the rufous hummingbird is *Selasphorus rufus*, the first word being Greek for "light bearing" and the second word being Latin for reddish. Nice description because the male's coppery color shines like a newly minted penny.

Broad-tailed hummingbirds dart in and out from feeders making their loud cricket-like buzzing sound. The unmistakable sound comes from a slot in the tenth outer primary feather that produces a metallic cheeping noise as it beats the air up to 70 times a second.

So prevalent are nesting broad-tailed hummers in the western mountains that Scott Roederer says in his book, *Birding Rocky Mountain National Park*, "If you miss this one, you're not paying attention."

In Texas, the birds nest in Big Bend and Guadalupe National Park as well as in the Davis Mountains. Broad-tailed hummers migrate to the central highlands of Mexico for the winter, and only rarely show up on the Texas coast during the winter.

The second word in the broad-tailed hummer's scientific name, *Selasphorus platycercus*, comes from the Greek for "flat-tailed." The moniker appropriately describes the bird's rounded tail with wide, pointed feathers. Otherwise, the broad-tailed hummer somewhat resembles the ruby-throated hummingbird that's common in Houston during migration.

I had to wonder why so many individuals of three hummingbird species came to Susan Ward's home.

Ward proffered this explanation: "Our home is near 8,000 feet and it's in a ponderosa-savannah type terrain on the side of Prospect Mountain in Estes Park. When I first moved here, I put a hummingbird feeder out and immediately got hummingbirds. There is something about this habitat that the hummers really do like."

However, I have a romantic and unscientific explanation. Hummingbirds, being nature's exquisite works of art, visit the Wards because Susan and John are master artists.

Susan is a supremely gifted potter whose hands mold clay into elegant designs that capture your attention every bit as much as the hummers in her backyard. John is the famous landscape photographer whose "American Landscape" prints are in the permanent collection of the El Paso Museum of Art. His annual Rocky Mountain National Park Calendar should grace the homes and offices of all of us who love the Colorado Rockies.

Of course, the Wards cannot open their home to the public for viewing hummingbirds. They need the solace of their mountain home to produce artistic masterworks.

If you visit Estes Park or Rocky Mountain National Park in the summer, you'll find numerous locations to enjoy western hummingbirds. Almost all the lodges have hummingbird feeders, and the YMCA welcomes visitors to watch hummingbirds at their facility. Also, look for hummers among the national park's beautiful summertime flowering plants.

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