

Hummingbirds

I have always, even before I became a birder, been intrigued by hummingbirds. From the dazzling Rufous Hummingbirds to the Ruby-throats and Calliopes, these small birds are unique, beautiful gems. I had first become interested in hummingbirds watching them at my aunt and uncle's feeders and visiting the Hummingbird Festival every summer at Starsmore Discovery Center in West Cheyenne Cañon Park.

Late this August, I was reading at the table when I noticed several hummingbirds coming to the feeder near the window. Hoping for a better look at their behavior and coloration, I went outside to watch them more closely. I also hoped to get a few good photos at the same time.

The first hummer that I observed that day was a juvenile male, Rufous Hummingbird. He took a perch in the dead branches of an elm tree in the front of our yard. After I concealed myself behind a large juniper bush, I was able to watch him preen for most of the morning.

He had an iridescent green back and head, rufous sides, and a brilliant red tail. I watched as he flexed his wings and tail, and preened his feathers with his beak. While



watching him flex his tail, I noticed a few green speckles on it. When I looked at Steve Howell's photographic hummingbird guide later, I saw a photo of a bird that looked very much like the Rufous that I observed. The photo in Steve's guide depicted a bird that was identified as an Allen's, based on the date of the photo and by the location.

Looking at this photo, however, made me doubt my own identification, because based on the similarities in the coloration of the body (softer colors) and gorget pattern (speckles farther apart, greener), I half believed this could be an Allen's. However, based on the distributions of the species, it should not be an Allen's because these are migratory mainland breeders that are resident birds

of Southern California, as well as summer residents along the west slope of coast ranges from Ventura County, CA to Coos County, in costal SW Oregon.¹ There are also range maps in both Steve Howell's book and the Sibley Guides that clearly show Allen's Hummingbirds being nowhere near Colorado, therefore this bird should be a Rufous. The best way to positively identify a Rufous from an Allen's is to look at the differences in the tail feathers. Allen's have narrower outer retrices than Rufous (most noticable on R5), and a distinctive shape to R2 (more diamond shaped tip on a Rufous than on an Allen's).² Although this detail is hard to see in the field, it became very apparent in my photograph, therefore I positively Identified this bird as a Rufous.

I also observed what was unmistakably an adult male Broad-tailed Hummingbird.



I identified him immediately as this species by the distinguishing metallic buzzing trill his wings made when he flew.³ He also had the telling field marks such as a full, flaming red gorget, iridescent green back, greenish sides, and a slightly white chin.⁴ I also noticed that he let off a lot of high chip notes and bobbed his tail when doing so, also very characteristic of a Broad-tailed Hummingbird.⁵ He also was competing with the Rufous to dominate the feeder.

There were a few other humming birds that visited the feeder, though they seldom got a long pull of the juice. A couple of the ones I focused on were a juvenile Broad-tailed Hummingbird, and an adult female Calliope Hummingbird.

The Broad-tailed juvenile that I observed looked rather raggedy and a bit large with a dull speckled gorget. He wasn't an attractive bird, and was always chased away just before he could get a drink.

The Calliope I observed was tiny! She had the faintest hint of speckling under her chin, and some cinnamon on her sides. Indeed, she was mostly a clear cream except for her greenish back and the top of her head. She had the build of a Calliope for certain; a short squared tail, and a long primary projection. She was quiet when she



flew⁶ and extremely shy! The Rufous and Broad-tail chased her off, but she got a few good drinks at our feeder. Steve Howell says that the Calliope is “often dominated at feeding sites by other hummers”⁶, a statement that I have found to be true at all the feeders I’ve watched.

I also saw a less prominent adult male Rufous who stopped briefly for a drink. He was bigger than the earlier juvenile, with no green on his tail. I first spotted him at the butterfly bush, then at the feeder, and he took just enough time to chase away another new guest, a female Broad-tailed (who I didn’t get to see clearly). Kaufman aptly names the Rufous 'small but feisty'⁸, which was certainly true here.

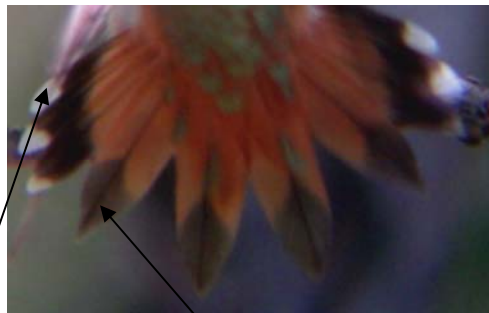
This was one of the best days I’ve spent watching hummingbirds, and I learned a lot about them from this experience. It was interesting to see how true the statements in the different field guides were and how accurately they described these birds’ behaviors and colorations.

I was able to get some great pictures too, which was an added plus!

Here are some other photos that I used for id purposes on the Rufous Hummingbird.



Note the width of this immature male Rufous tail feather. It is wider and shaped differently than on immature male Allen's.⁹



Note this immature male Rufous tail feather. It is wider and the tip is more diamond shaped than on an immature male Allen's.¹⁰

References

- 1) Steve N. G. Howell, *Hummingbirds of North America, The Photographic Guide*, Princeton University Press, 2003, p. 199
- 2) Steve N. G. Howell, *Hummingbirds of North America, The Photographic Guide*, p. 189
- 3) Kenn Kaufman, *Birds of North America*, Houghton Mifflin, 2000, p. 214
- 4) David Allen Sibley, *The Sibley Guide to Birds of Western North America*, Alfred A. Knopf Inc., 2003, p. 261
- 5) David Allen Sibley, *The Sibley Guide to Birds of Western North America*, p. 261
- 6) David Allen Sibley, *The Sibley Guide to Birds of Western North America*, p. 261
- 7) Steve N. G. Howell, *Hummingbirds of North America, The Photographic Guide*, p.168
- 8) Kenn Kaufman, *Birds of North America*, p. 214
- 9) Steve N. G. Howell, *Hummingbirds of North America, The Photographic Guide*, p.189, Figure 8
- 10) Steve N. G. Howell, *Hummingbirds of North America, The Photographic Guide*, p.189, Figure 8