

The Hummingbirds of Arizona

By Diane Tilton,

AZGFD Information & Education Manager

Of the 14 species of hummingbirds, four can be commonly found in the White Mountains. Birds, including hummingbirds and doves, are important pollinators throughout the world. Other birds which serve as tropical pollinators include honeycreepers in Hawaii, honeyeaters in Australia and sunbirds in the Old World tropics. Globally, there are 2,000 bird species that feed on nectar and/or the insects and spiders associated with nectar bearing flowers. Ornithophily is the term for pollination by birds. Try and say that fast five times.

Flowers that are visited by hummingbirds are typically tubular with petals that are recurved to allow the bird access to the nectar. The plants will have strong supports for perching. The flowers are brightly colored (usually red, yellow or orange) and odorless since birds have a poor sense of smell.

Hummingbirds have good vision and, of all the colors, they seem to be extremely attracted to red. Their long bills are designed to reach into the flowers in search of nectar while their faces get dusted with pollen that they then move to another flower to pollinate it. These mighty birds weigh between two and eight grams (a penny is 2.5 grams!). In order to power their hearts that pump 1,200 times/minute and wings that beat 70 times/second, hummingbirds must eat frequently. They consume several times their body weight per day in nectar. They also supplement their diet with small insects. Hummingbird young only eat bugs that their mothers provide.

Let's look at the four species we find in the mountains of Arizona...

Black-chinned hummingbirds are small and slender with a green back and a fairly straight bill. Males have a black throat with a thin iridescent purple base. Females have a pale throat (female hummingbirds can be difficult to identify). Both males and females have flanks that are glossed with a dull metallic green and a black bill. Black-chinned hummingbirds can often be found perched at the very top of a bare branch. If you're close by and quiet, you might hear a low-pitched humming sound produced by their wings.

As summer residents in Arizona, the black-chinned hummingbirds are breeding in most of Arizona. They migrate to western Mexico in the winter. The oldest known black-chinned hummingbird was a female who was at least 11 years and two months old when she was recaptured and re-released during a banding operation in Texas.

The tiny calliope hummingbird is the smallest bird in North America, north of Mexico. Both males and females have green underparts. The male has a magenta and white streaked throat. The

female calliope has a dull whitish throat and whitish or cinnamon-buff chest and belly (I told you the female hummingbirds can be hard to identify!).

The calliope hummingbirds breed in the summer in the mountains of the Pacific Northwest. They migrate through Arizona on their way to Mexico. This minute bird migrates in the spring up the Pacific Coast, a distance over 3,000 miles. The males will migrate about a month earlier than the females as they head north. On the journey south, the males also leave earlier while the females are still caring for chicks. The females will migrate next, leaving the juveniles to complete their first migration without any parental accompaniment. Overwintering is becoming more common in southern areas of the United States. The oldest recorded calliope was a female, at least eight years and one month old when she was recaptured and re-released during a banding operation in Idaho in 2014.

The broad-tailed hummingbird is a medium-sized hummingbird with shiny green underparts. The adult male has a rose-red throat and the female has a white throat that is speckled with iridescent green or bronze.

The broad-tailed hummingbirds are summer residents in Arizona. They were long thought to winter only in Mexico but some are now found on the U.S. Gulf Coast during the colder months, possibly being sustained by the proliferation of feeders and exotic plantings. The longest lived broad-tailed recorded was a female at least 12 years and two months when she was recaptured and re-released during a banding operation in Colorado.

And lastly, but not least, my favorite, the rufous hummingbird. The feisty rufous hummingbird is fairly small, with a slender, nearly straight bill. The tail tapers to a point and the rufous has fairly short wings that don't reach the end of the tail when the hummingbird is perched. The male is bright orange on the back and belly with an iridescent red throat. The female is green above with rufous flanks and rufous patches in the green tail and often a spot of orange in the throat.

If you have a rufous hummingbird at your feeder, it will be easy to recognize. Their orange coloring combined with their extreme territorial behavior makes them easy to spot. They will often chase, and sometimes attack, any other hummingbird that is at "their" feeder. The rufous hummingbird makes one of the longest migratory journeys of any bird in the world, when you consider its body size. Their travels will take them nearly 4,000 miles from breeding grounds in Alaska and northwest Canada to their wintering sites in southwestern Mexico. In the spring, they travel north up the Pacific Coast and return in late summer and fall by the Rocky Mountains. They will pass through Arizona during their southern trip back to Mexico. The oldest recorded rufous was a female at least eight years and 11 months old when she was recaptured and re-released during a banding operation in British Columbia.

What can you do to attract hummingbirds to your yard? It's really pretty easy. My first suggestion would be to plant flowers that they can access nectar from. Planting a wide variety of flowering plants that bloom at different times will help provide nectar and attract hummingbirds

throughout the season. Clumps of flowers in partially-open areas often attract hummingbirds. Providing a protected area (cover) or a perching area (tree limb) nearby improves habitat for hummingbirds. Look for flowers that are tubular and brightly-colored. You can also hang up a hummingbird feeder. There is no need to purchase premade hummingbird food. It is easy, and much less expensive, to make at home. Just mix one part sugar with four parts water and bring to a boil (this kills any bacteria or mold that might be present). Cool the mixture and then just add to the feeder. Store any extra sugar water in the refrigerator. Do not add red dye or purchase hummingbird food with red dye. This is harmful to the birds and unnecessary. They will be attracted to the feeder, not the color of the water.