

A publication by:

NORTHWEST WILDLIFE PRESERVATION SOCIETY

Rufous Hummingbird

Selasphorus rufus



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Hummingbirds

Hummingbirds are some of the smallest birds we can find world wide. There are many different species of Humming birds that live all over the Americas. There have been documented sightings in every state and province except for Hawaii, Prince Edward Island and Quebec. For the past 70 years, bird experts have practiced banding humming birds' legs to document their travels, lifespan, sex and locations. This information is stored at the Bird Banding Lab at Laurel Maryland. In 1992, there were 50 million entries of humming birds.

Interestingly, varieties of hummingbirds vary with the variety of plant and flower species in different areas. The equator has the most species with 163 hummingbirds, Central America as 55 bird species and North America 17. Furthermore, there are more hummingbirds west than east. This corresponds with varieties of flower species in these regions as well. Some theorize flowers depend on the birds for cross pollination. Regardless though, humming birds have amazing appetites and eat half their weight in sugar a day. They go where the flowers are...

The Rufous Hummingbird

The Rufous hummingbird is the most common species in the Pacific Northwest. But it is also found in 47 U.S. States, 8 Canadian Provinces and 22 of Mexico's 32 States. It is known as the feisty one and is definitely very aggressive. It will attack anything threatening its territory including jays, crows and even hawks! The average Rufous lifespan is 3 to 5 years and the longest life recorded is 6 years.

Male Characteristics: Rufous back with some green flecks and an orange-red throat. He is about 40.3mm long and weighs 3.22g.

Female Characteristics: Rufous on side and tail and some red flecks on throat. She is about 44.4mm long and weighs 3.41g.

Be careful when identifying the Rufous though, because it is often confused with the Allen's Hummingbird and some claim only experts can identify them with certainty.

Diet

Hummingbirds spend most of their days eating. Humans would have to eat twice their body size each day if they had the same metabolism as hummingbirds. They can lap nectar up to 13 licks a second. Hummingbirds will go to any flower for nectar but they prefer long tubular flower because other nectar eating insects and birds have trouble reaching the heart of the flower. As a result hummingbirds find more nectar in these flowers.

They will also eat insects for protein and enjoy feeding on gnats, midges and white flies off leaves, spider webs and even out of the air. Another favorite of these birds is the sap holes in trees. They will find large quantities of sugar from these sap holes and will defend their trees even more aggressively than flower patches.

You can attract hummingbirds by setting up a feeder in your yard. Hummingbird nectar can be made up of four parts water and one part sugar. But it has been shown that if provided with a choice, hummingbirds do prefer real nectar compared to feeders.

Migration

The rufous hummingbird has the longest migration (approximately 5,000 km) of any bird in the world in proportion to its size. It breeds farther north than any hummingbird, in Alaska and travels south all the way to Central Mexico in the winter. It migrates at odd times though; its southern migration is between June and October, while its northern migration back to its breeding grounds is between February and May.

During its migration, the Rufous will have frequent short stops and has little difficulty establishing territory to feed on. At night it will reach a state of torpor to retain energy. This means it will reduce its heart rate to 50 beats a minute while its breathing will become irregular. Torpor can last 8 to 14 hours. While some hummingbirds only go into torpor as a last resort, the rufous often sleeps in torpor and thus saves energy.

Reproduction

The rufous will often return to the same sight as the year before to breed and raise young. In some cases, the female will even build a nest in the same location. The female will build the nest before copulation. This will take her 2 weeks to 20 days. The nests are cup and turban shaped and composed of plant down interwoven and bound with spider webs. The hummingbird may even continue to add edges and "renovate" her nest with lichens and mosses after she has laid eggs.

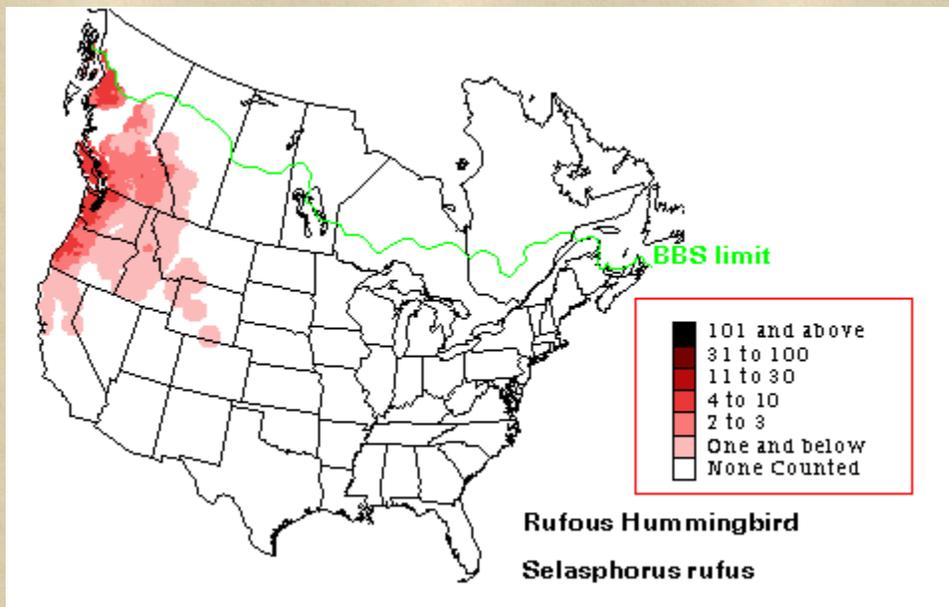
Hummingbirds, particularly the aggressive rufous does not communicate much beyond some buzzing, chattering and flapping of the wings. They are generally not social birds, but when they do interact, they have been reported doing

visual displays. While perched, tail or gorget spreading is done to show off iridescence of the feathers. In the air, shuttle flights (flying back and forth horizontally) and dive displays (downwards “j” motions) have been reported as well. The significance of these displays is arguable. Some say they are signs of aggression and some say they are signs of courtship. The dive display for example is said to mean that the female is ready to mate. In either case, it is know the female goes to the male’s territory to attract him, but they mate in the females territory perched in low shrubbery.

The female will usually lay 2 eggs (the smallest eggs in the world at 1/2”) and be the only one responsible for the offspring. As the young grow they will stretch out and flatten the nest. The mother will feed the young through regurgitation. When they are ready, the birds will begin flapping their wings while perched on the nest for exercise and eventually when strong enough, they will be able to fly. The hummingbird knows how to fly instinctively. As adults they will eventually be able to hover, fly backwards and sometimes even upside down. Their wings will be able to beat up to 78 times a second.

Dangers and Predators

Each year, an estimated 100million to one billion birds die after colliding with human built structures. Birds are often confused and see flowers and trees reflected in windows. They are also often trapped in buildings and structures such as garages and instinctively fly up not down and out of buildings. Hummingbirds will die within hours as a result if they do not have access to food. They also suffer from fungal infections and the avian pox virus. Cats are also predators. The Breeding Bird Survey (BBS) showed that the species (Rufous) had a significant decline of -2.7% per year from 1966-2001 across its range. A decrease in their favorite flowers has been shown and may be a result of habitat loss, an increased use of pesticides and replacement of native plants by invasive plants.



Breeding Range Map courtesy of Patuxent Wildlife Research Center, United States Department of the Interior, Laurel, MD. From *THE NORTH AMERICAN BREEDING BIRD SURVEY RESULTS AND ANALYSIS, Version 96.3* by J. R. Sauer, J.E. Hines, G. Gough, I. Thomas, B.J. Peterjohn.

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