



THE TEXAS

# HUMMER

SPRING 2000

A NEWSLETTER FOR TEXAS HUMMINGBIRD ROUNDUP PARTICIPANTS



*Photo of Rufous Hummingbird courtesy of Juanita Gibson, Hidalgo County.*

## MISSION STATEMENT



The mission of the Hummingbird Roundup is to improve the conservation of hummingbirds by gathering information about their distribution and providing information to the public. The survey encourages Texans to maintain natural habitat for the birds, properly care for hummingbird feeders and record sightings. Your observations further our knowledge of the hummingbirds of Texas, guide new research efforts, and help the Wildlife Diversity Program in its mission to keep these tiny visitors returning each year.

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### THE YEAR IN REVIEW

The sixth year of the Texas Hummingbird Roundup saw a year of rebuilding and growth, with the number of Roundup 2000 surveys mailed out reaching 250 by December of 1999. This means that the numbers in this year's survey are again down slightly over previous years. Many of these requests were mailed out in the final two months of 1999, and these participants apparently decided to await the 2000 birds before beginning their reports.

Surveys were returned by 85 of the 250 participants that registered in 1999 for a 34% participation level. Reports representing 49 counties were received including 5 of the 9 Trans-Pecos counties. Notably missing from the Trans-Pecos was a report from Reeves County. Only one observer from one Panhandle county reported, leaving a big hole in that region of the state.

How can these holes be filled? We did not receive reports from several counties where surveys were mailed to, despite the reminders sent over the holiday season. Perhaps a follow up note just after the New Year is in order. To strengthen interest in the Roundup, a series of Hummingbird Workshops is being considered – with emphasis in those areas where observers are needed. More information will follow in later communication.

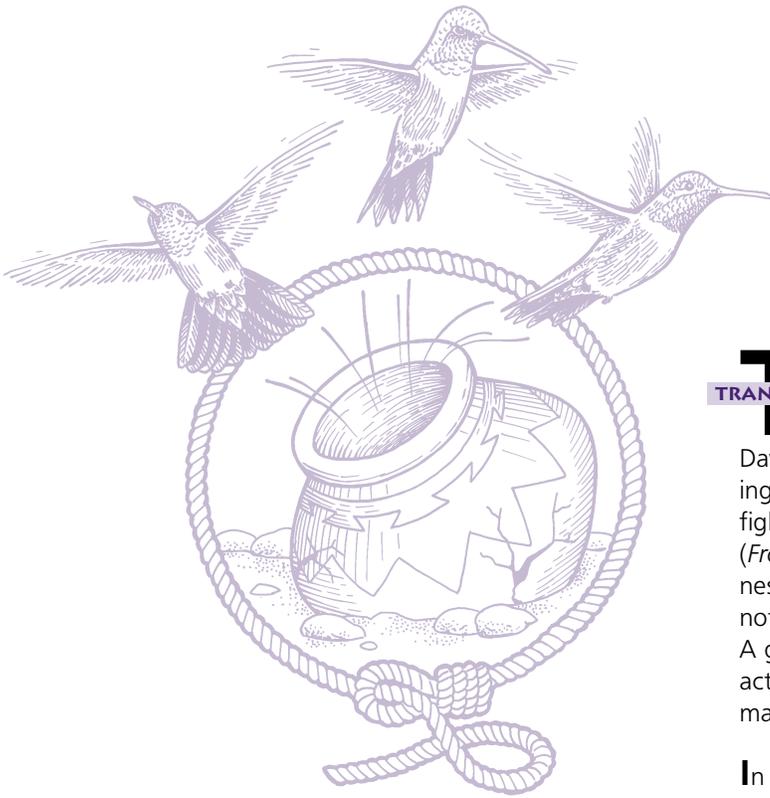
Observers reported a total of 10 species this year, although not all of the birds considered common in Texas were reported. Magnificent and Blue-throated Hummingbirds were absent from our reports while a probable Allen's (Harris County) and a Green-violet Ear (Palo Pinto County) joined the reports.

To join the Hummingbird Roundup, please send a \$6 donation with your name, address, county, telephone number, and e-mail address to:

Hummingbird Roundup  
Texas Parks and Wildlife  
4200 Smith School Road  
Austin, TX 78744

Please remember to return your Roundup 2000 survey forms by **January 15, 2001** to the address above.





## NOTES FROM THE TRANS-PECOS

This year we received six reports from Hummingbird Roundup participants west of the Pecos River. While these numbers are very small for a region so rich in hummingbird diversity and so diverse in hummingbird habitat, many more packets were sent into that region late in the year. This holds a lot of promise for the 2000 survey.

More than 50% of the counties in the Trans-Pecos were represented by these 6 observers! This is good news in that the surveys from

this region are not isolated or skewed by urban concentration. Eight species were observed in the region this year by those observers, with another four species observed by the coordinator or TPW biologists during visits to the region. Notable among the observations from the region were Violet-crowned Hummingbirds observed in Fort Davis (first for Jeff Davis county), Berylline Hummingbird returning to the Fort Davis area and a Broad-billed Hummingbird reported early in the season at Fort Davis.

## TRANS-PECOS OBSERVER'S COMMENTS

The Avent Family of Jeff Davis County reported observing female hummingbirds fighting over snake cotton (*Froelichia* sp.) to use in their nests. I noticed that they did not report finding a nest. A good way to do so is to actually follow a bird carrying material for nesting.

In October, Melvin Walker La-Follette of Presidio County reported that he saw a Blue-throated Hummingbird for the first time since 1993.

He notes "I observed a large, dark hummingbird perched in an acacia shrub. She was catching insects as they flew by. Then, she had to reach for one and left the perch, displaying the unmistakable tail with the huge, white spots." This points out once again that features other than the gorget can help identify hummingbirds.

I must apologize to Mr. La-Follette for mistakenly placing him in Brewster County last year, see Hummer, Spring 1999. He was the observer who saw the probable Berylline Hummingbird mentioned last year.

Babs Kneupper of Pecos County pointed out one of the reasons we are so inter-

ested in this area of great climatic and geographic diversity. She observed a definite pattern of birds reappearing after significant rainfalls, and disappearing during the dry spells. The diverse habitats in the Trans Pecos region produce areas of dry weather and other areas of heavy rains at different times of the year. Hopefully these can be correlated with observation data to help determine some hummingbird behaviors.

The Zelazny Family of Brewster County may have a very interesting report. They mention a juvenile RTHU at their feeders in September and October. This would be noteworthy since it is considerably out of traditional RTHU habitat. While this could be a wandering juvenile, a nesting Ruby-throated Hummingbird in west Texas would be noteworthy.

Dr. D. Kruzich of El Paso County notes that apparently those who have wintering hummingbirds in El Paso are in the mountain foothills. This is one of the reasons we will be asking people to describe their habitat and those in the Trans-Pecos to determine their elevation above sea level.

## HUMMINGBIRD IDENTIFICATION

People are often surprised when we ask for pictures of unusual or rare hummingbirds, but hummingbird identification, as those who have a number of hummingbirds on their lists will tell you, is not always an easy matter. There are examples when a person is describing a bird they saw and identified it as one species, when suddenly a feature will be noted that does not fit. A few simple identification tips help make identification of adult males easier.

Relative size can quickly rule out some birds in some cases. If we are looking at an unusually large hummingbird, we would not be considering the Lucifer, Costa's or Calliope, for instance. On the other hand, Magnificent, Blue-throated and Violet-crowned would certainly be possible candidates. When size draws your attention to a bird, note why it caught your eye and use that information in your identification.

Gorget color, since it is dependent on the light angle, can not always be relied on for identification needs. Hard tissue colors, such as those in the bill, will be constant. Texas hummingbirds essentially have two bill colors – red or black. Occasionally these will be combined as in a red base with black tip. Notice the bill color if you can, it may help in the identification.

Not only is the color of the bill important, the shape of the bill can also help us isolate a species from the eighteen

current Texas hummingbirds. A straight bill may be typical of a wide variety of birds, but a curved bill is a feature of note. The Lucifer Hummingbird – a west Texas beauty – can be quickly noted by a sharply downcurved bill. Other hummingbirds, including the Green Violet-ear may not have the strong downward curve to their bill, but may have a slight downcurve. A short bill, on the other hand is a feature of the Calliope Hummingbird, while the Violet-crowned Hummingbird can be noted by the unusually long bill.

Sound can also be an effective tool in identifying the hummingbirds of Texas. While we do not usually think of

them as songbirds, hummers do have a repertoire of songs and calls that can be used to call your attention to a new bird. Get to know the songs of the birds that normally feed at your feeder. It will help you to notice that new, possibly rare, jewel.

Songs surprisingly are not the only identifying sound hummingbirds make. Birds of the genus *Selasphorus*, which in Texas includes the Rufous, Allen's and Broad-tailed hummingbirds, have a unique wing structure that produces a trilling whistle when the males fly. This characteristic is

most pronounced in the Broad-tailed Hummingbirds, but can be found throughout the genus. It has helped observers in Houston confirm *Selasphorus* presence.

So next time you see an unusual bird, don't be too frustrated if the light isn't right or the bird won't stay put long enough to get good light on the gorget. Look at the other features that may help to eliminate some of the confusing species. It makes identification easier.



Photo of Ruby-throated Hummingbird  
courtesy of Nancy Sprouse, Harris County.



Illustration by Elishea Smith



New hummingbird sightings being reviewed by the Texas Birds Records Committee include:

- Green Violet-ear from Kerr, Travis and Palo Pinto counties
- Green-breasted Mango from Cameron County
- Violet-crowned Hummingbird from Hidalgo and Jeff Davis counties
- Allen's Hummingbird from Bexar and Harris counties
- Broad-billed Hummingbird from Jeff Davis, Brewster, Cameron and Kinney counties
- Berylline Hummingbird from Jeff Davis county

These reviews help us to help bird enthusiasts and researchers by delivering reliable information on where birds have occurred.



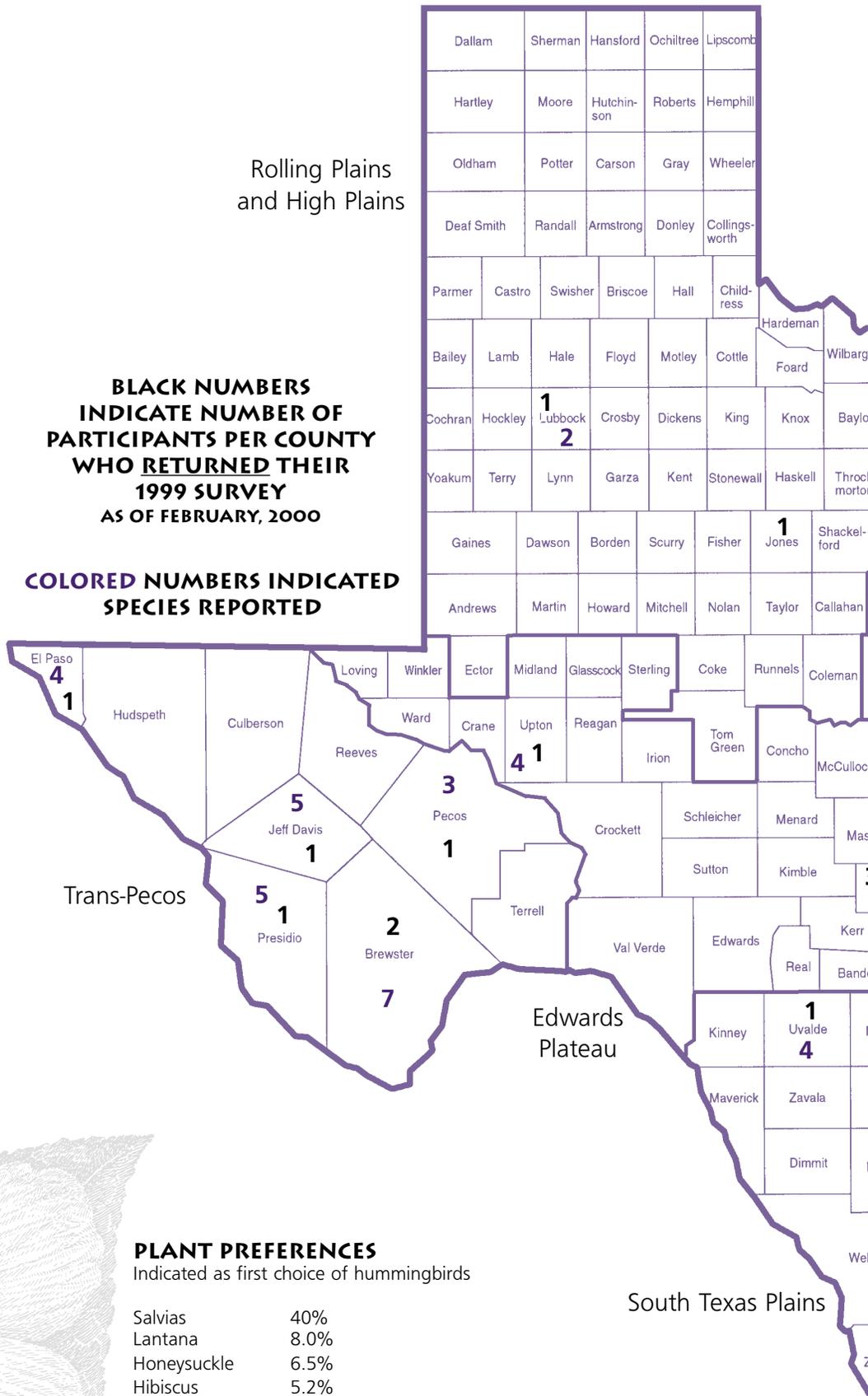
**BREAKING NEWS FOR THOSE IN BASTROP/WASHINGTON COUNTIES**

A Buff-bellied Hummingbird is again making its presence known at feeders in Bastrop County. It has been reported as late as April 19 north of Bastrop.

**Rolling Plains and High Plains**

**BLACK NUMBERS INDICATE NUMBER OF PARTICIPANTS PER COUNTY WHO RETURNED THEIR 1999 SURVEY AS OF FEBRUARY, 2000**

**COLORED NUMBERS INDICATED SPECIES REPORTED**



**PLANT PREFERENCES**

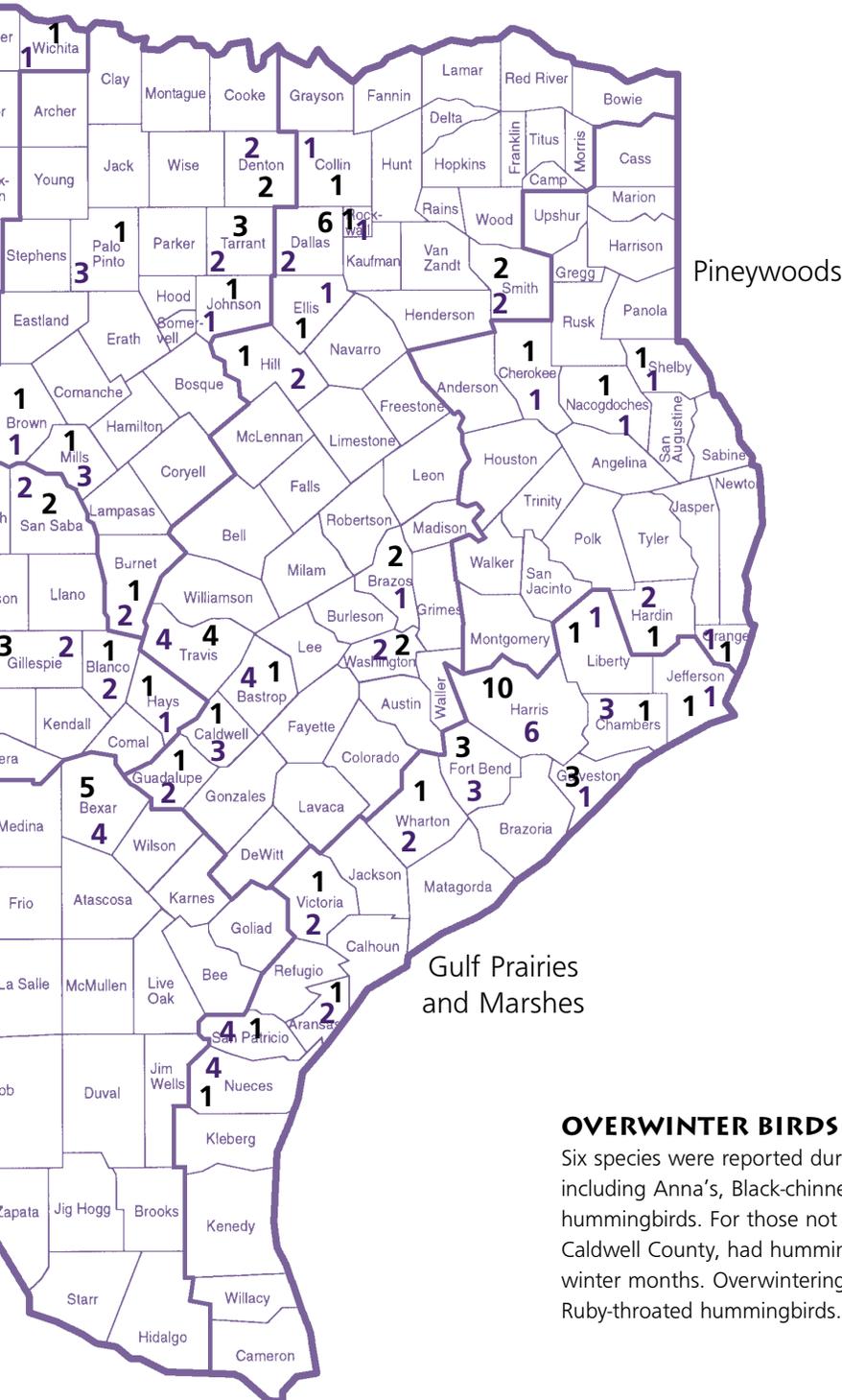
Indicated as first choice of hummingbirds

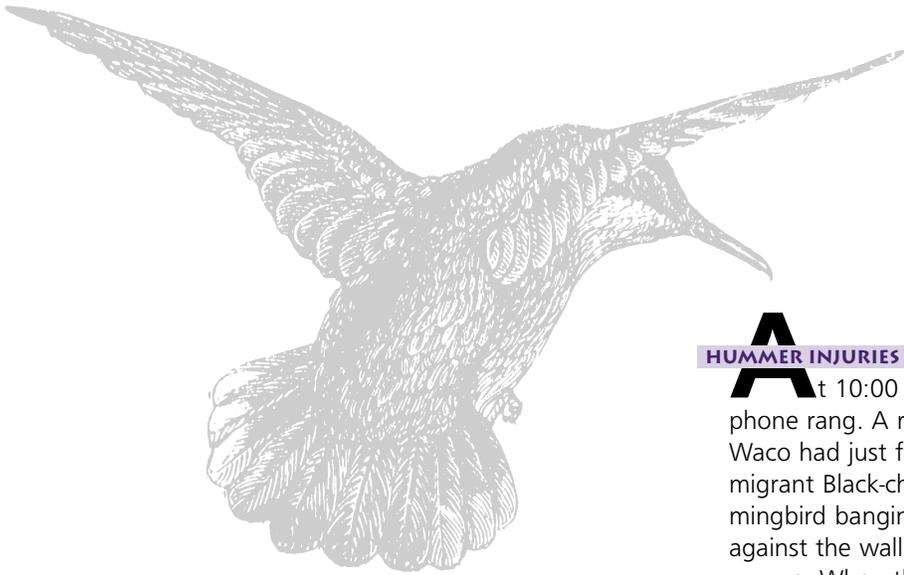
- Salvias 40%
- Lantana 8.0%
- Honeysuckle 6.5%
- Hibiscus 5.2%
- Trumpet Creeper 5.2%

Honorable mentions include Turk's Cap, Agave and Hamelia all at 4% each.

Cross Timbers  
and Prairies

Post Oak Savannah  
and Blackland Prairies





### EXCITING HAPPENINGS

The telephone and e-mail systems at the Hummingbird Roundup were kept busy this year with identification requests and concerns about reduced numbers and late birds. The Dallas area was particularly notable with the metroplex not reporting birds until July!

A notable report not included in the Roundup this year was a beautiful Broad-billed Hummingbird captured and banded in Knickerbocker, Irion County in June. A photo and excellent verbal description accompanied this report.

Photography for identification does not have to be a bird in the hand. We have photos by Marcia Effinger of Washington County recording the first Buff-bellied Hummingbird she had seen in that county in more than 20 years that she has been watching hummingbirds for.

The photo of this bird-on-the-wing captured just enough detail for us to see the features we need.



Illustration by Rob Fleming

### HUMMER INJURIES UPDATE

**A**t 10:00 a.m. the phone rang. A resident in Waco had just found a migrant Black-chinned Hummingbird banging its head against the wall of their garage. When they picked up the bird, its eyes were nearly closed, and it seemed very weak.

**T**his sad story had a happy ending. The family was able to rehabilitate the bird and release it to the wild readily, with little interruption in the bird's life.

**W**hen the collision occurred, the family took the bird and called for information on how to contact a wildlife rehabilitator. While we were anxious to get the bird in the care of a rehabilitator as soon as necessary, these birds have proven quite resilient – especially if they are offered the high-energy nectar fairly quickly.

**I**suggested that the family try feeding the bird every 15 minutes, keep the bird warm and on a soft surface, and attempt to release the bird at the first indication that it may be ready.

**A**t 12:15 p.m. the phone rang again. The excited voice on the other end of the phone line told me that the beautiful little Black-chinned male had revived quite nicely and flew first to a perch then to the upper branches of the tree and finally disappeared. A few minutes later a happy hummingbird was seen buzzing around the newly-erected feeders.

**R**ehabilitation can have a happy ending, but it is important to call on the trained rehabilitators when necessary. Remember – you can not legally house or handle a hummingbird without state and federal permits!



*Wildlife rehabilitators, licensed by Texas Parks and Wildlife, have the knowledge and experience necessary to effectively care for injured or orphaned wildlife. If you encounter such an animal, please contact the Wildlife Diversity Program at 1-800-792-1112, ext. 4481 or (512) 389-4481, and we will provide you with the name of your nearest rehabilitator.*

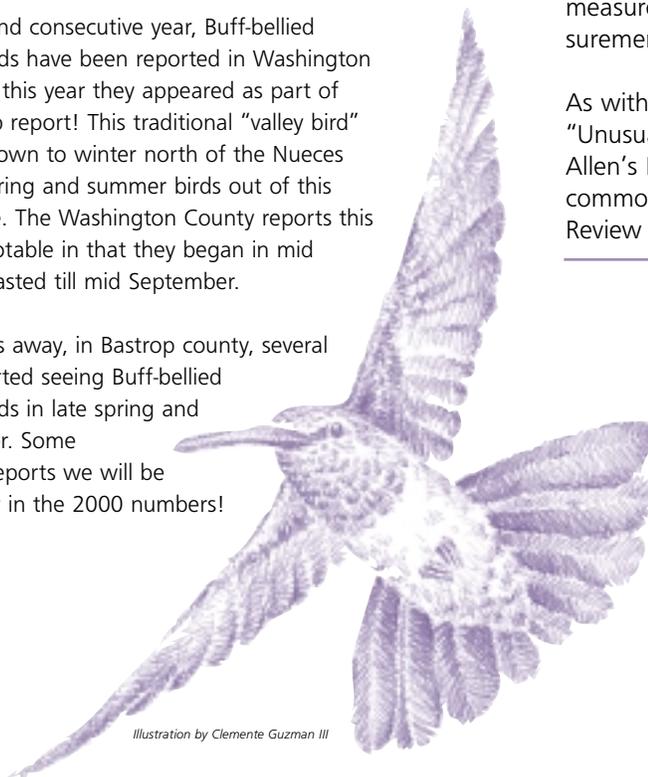


*Photo of Rufous Hummingbird courtesy of Juanita Gibson, Hidalgo County.*

### **OUT OF RANGE BUFF-BELLIED HUMMERS RAISE INTEREST**

For the second consecutive year, Buff-bellied Hummingbirds have been reported in Washington County, and this year they appeared as part of the Roundup report! This traditional "valley bird" has been known to winter north of the Nueces River, but spring and summer birds out of this area are rare. The Washington County reports this year were notable in that they began in mid March and lasted till mid September.

Two counties away, in Bastrop county, several people reported seeing Buff-bellied Hummingbirds in late spring and early summer. Some interesting reports we will be watching for in the 2000 numbers!



*Illustration by Clemente Guzman III*

### **GENETIC STUDIES DEMONSTRATE IDENTIFICATION DIFFICULTIES**

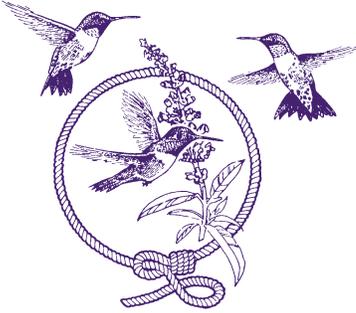


The survey forms for the year 2001 will have a noticeable addition in the species code area – a simple "R/A identifier" to be used for the *Selasphorus* species that show a lot of red-brown color (the Rufous and Allen's hummingbirds). This change was brought about because of concerns over misidentification when genetic studies identified "green backed" Rufous.

The Texas Bird Records Committee has asked that a photograph and description of the bird accompany any suspected Allen's Hummingbird. Since researchers working with these birds will not trust their identification of Allen's Hummingbirds unless the bird is in hand and measurements are taken, particularly tail feather measurements, we ask that observers follow this same rule.

As with all of the less common Texas species, the "Unusual Sightings" form needs to be completed for Allen's Hummingbirds. While some consider them a common site in Texas, TBRC still considers them a Review Species.

## NOTES FROM HUMMER WATCHERS



Blanche Davis from Harris County reports that "In August when the birds really come in" they had "2 birds sitting on each other's backs and eating from the same flower at our feeder." This is a very interesting observation given the hummer's reputation for aggressively defending food sources.



Jim Woodley of Washington County may have found a way to notice the dominant birds at a feeder. He noted that the birds he considered dominant at the feeder would feed longer than what he identified as transient birds.



Bill and Edna Courtney from Dallas County report that females can be aggressive too as they noticed a young female and an adult female aggressively displaying to one another for a period of more than 20 minutes. The aggression seemed to be centered on a feeder.



Helen Baines of Fort Bend County observed hummingbirds using their bill as a

weapon during migration. She describes a particularly aggressive male (not a Rufous from her report) pecking other hummingbirds with it's bill. An interesting character behavior at one time not accepted by hummingbird researchers.



One of our observers witnessed an example of why we encourage people to keep their feeders active year round or to put them up EARLY in the year. Rosie McFarland of Jones County noted "the first I knew they were back, flying around where I hung the feeder, shocked me. Didn't think they came back that early."



The Birdwell Family from Dallas County found that, despite records where the stars and stripes have attracted hummingbirds, hanging the flag too close to the feeder may discourage the birds.



Rose Ann Jordan of Jefferson County has noticed that, since she has planted Mexi-

can Heather she has fewer problems with bees around her feeder. Might this be a natural control for this pest? The bees seem to spend more time near the Mexican Heather.



Do hummingbirds and snow mix? Apparently so. Rosemary English of Lubbock County reports an immature Rufous dodging snowflakes in 18° weather last winter! This bird apparently celebrated the new year with a bottle of warmed sugar water!



Finally, Ken Dollar from Chambers County reinforces our confidence that hummingbirds will look anywhere for a free lunch. He notes that a single female Ruby-throated Hummingbird checked out the amber running lights on his travel trailer, followed by the red Texas symbol on his license plate, and finally the blue safety seal on his electric meter. An interesting combination of colors – especially the order.

### THE COORDINATOR LEARNS TOO!



This past season taught the coordinator an important lesson about citizen science projects – keep the forms current! Trying to use the remaining 1998 forms served only to increase confusion – both in the office and for some of our participants. I apologize for the confusion and the 2001 forms are already on the press!



#### THE TEXAS HUMMER

is a publication of  
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Written by Mark Klym



#### Recipe for Making Your Own Hummingbird Food

**Ingredients:** 4 parts water, 1 part sugar  
**Directions:** Bring water to boil, stir in sugar, and boil for 2-3 minutes. Let cool and store excess in refrigerator.  
**Reminders:** Do **not** substitute with honey. Feeders should be cleaned and refilled every few days, and remember it is necessary to clean the feeder more frequently during the warmer months than in the winter.



4200 SMITH SCHOOL ROAD  
AUSTIN, TEXAS 78744  
1-800-792-1112  
www.tpwd.state.tx.us

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