

NATURE NOTES – AUGUST 30 2018

Although we are poised on the brink of that birder's long-anticipated happening - fall migration - activity is still pretty quiet in the woodlands surrounding our two lakes. Not so, however, around our hummingbird feeders, where four or more Ruby-throated Hummingbirds regularly duke it out for feeding rights. However, with breeding and raising young out of the way, these birds may begin migrating back to southern climes as early as mid-August, so enjoy them while you can!

The Ruby-throated Hummingbird is the only species of hummingbird found in Eastern Canada. It is also one of the few of some 300 species of hummingbirds that undertakes an extensive migration. These hummingbirds we are enjoying here at Rainbow Lake can be found on wintering grounds as far south as western Panama, where, incidentally, we have had the pleasure of feeding them while staying at a casita in Chiriqui. Part of this migration involves a non-stop flight over the 800 km Gulf of Mexico, an incredible feat for a tiny bird which weighs only 3-4 grams. In fact the caloric requirement of such a flight definitely exceeds an adult hummingbird's body weight. Researchers solved this apparent mystery when they discovered that Ruby-throated Hummingbirds double their fat mass in preparation for the 20-hour crossing, completely using up these reserves by the time they arrive.

Although everyone knows that hummingbirds feed on nectar, showing a slight preference for red, orange and bright pink tubular flowers, they also take sap and catch insects either on the wing or from bark, flowers, leaves and spiders' webs. In fact small arthropods make up an important part of the diet of adult hummingbirds, providing the needed protein, minerals and vitamins, and are fed to young hummingbirds since nectar is not sufficient to promote growth.

Hummingbirds are naturally very aggressive and definitely have not learnt the concept of sharing when it comes to feeding territories. Very often one male will stake out a feeder and repel all invaders. We have witnessed this behaviour in other species in Central America, particularly the little Rufous-tailed Hummingbird. One way to get over this is to place several feeders together, as the birds will have issues defending so many. Hummingbirds also have to defend their feeders against unlikely interlopers. At our feeders here we often see Hairy Woodpeckers sneakily land and suck up the nectar, cadging a tasty treat while the hummingbirds' backs are turned. For make no mistake, these little guys will think nothing of attacking the bigger birds. Even more peculiar are nocturnal thieves. While staying in Arizona, we could not understand why the hummingbird feeders kept emptying so fast ; that was until we found the bats were also having a sugary treat overnight! Hummingbirds can indeed be so aggressive as to kill each other and our guide in Colombia told us he had found dead hummingbirds with a beak of another impaled in their chests. Small but feisty!!

If you haven't had the pleasure of watching hummingbirds here at the lakes this summer, make sure to get feeders out in early May as the tiny birds will be arriving soon after. Use a mixture of four parts water to one part sugar, no need to colour the water, then sit back and be entertained by their aerial antics. In particular watch for their peculiar mating displays when the male swings in a pendulum-like flight to attract his chosen female. Meanwhile at present keep an eye out for a flash of bright green as these little jewels fly through the woods – they will all too soon be gone.

Alison Bentley, Rainbow Lake Area Rep.