



**This Rufous Hummingbird returned to
Jo O'Keefe's home on August 6**



**Its gorget will appear different
colors depending on the
angle of light**

Brunswick Wildlife Attracting Winter Hummers

Of the 300+ hummingbird species in the Western Hemisphere, only eighteen regularly breed in or visit the United States and Canada. The Ruby-throated Hummingbird is the only species that breeds east of the Mississippi. Ten others, however, have been officially recorded in North Carolina, showing up on rare occasions in fall and winter.

From summer into fall, there is usually a noticeable ebb and flow of hummingbird feeder activity. Hummingbird's main diet consists of insects and that is what they feed their young...the protein fuels rapid growth. Therefore nesting females will make fewer trips to your feeder during their first and second broods of the summer.

Near migration time, hummingbirds make more visits to feeders for carbs to fatten up for their long nonstop flights across the Gulf of Mexico...the anti-Adkins diet.

Hummingbird activity may vary in fall as they migrate south in waves. Through October, you may think they are all gone only to have another from the north show up the next day.

Then you say goodbye to hummingbirds until the following spring. Right? Not so fast! Leave your feeder up into late fall and winter and a vagrant western species may show up. It may spend the winter with you plus there is a fairly good chance it will return the following year.

Just ask Jo O'Keefe of Carolina Shores. For the fifth straight year, she has a visiting male Rufous Hummingbird.

In September 2004, Jo noticed a "brown hummer" at her feeder. She sent photos to her ornithologist son-in-law. In early November, after studying field guides and a few phone calls with her daughter relaying more details, they concluded it was a Rufous.

Susan Campbell, a Research Affiliate with the North Carolina Museum of Natural Sciences and one of only three licensed hummingbird banders in the Carolinas, banded him in February 2005. His next two visits began on September 1, 2005 and August 22, 2006.

In 2007 he arrived on August 9 and returned to the west coast in February 2008, but not before Campbell returned to weigh and measure him and verify his band number. By August 6, he was back after being gone less than six months.

Campbell believes it is Jo's guy but cautioned that she needs to see a couple of numbers from his band or recapture it to confirm his identity. As in previous years, Jo will eventually provide photographic confirmation of the band number but she is certain it is her hummer. "He flies to the window to greet me."

The phenomenon of overwintering hummingbirds in North Carolina has been recorded for many decades and observations are increasing, especially Rufous Hummingbirds. Have winter hummers always been around and seem more numerous because there are more observers who leave their feeders up? Are the numbers actually more numerous because so many feeders are left up all year?

For the Rufous, the answer seems to be "all of the above". Many experts now believe a distinct overwintering Rufous population exists in the southeast. "Extreme vagrancy" has a genetic component that may evolve into a new migration strategy in a species in only a few generations.

What explains their return visits? Most bird species exhibit site fidelity to breeding, overwintering, and stopover sites. Re-captures of banded wintering hummers seems to confirm that site fidelity determines where their fall migration ends. Vagrant hummers do not wander around their winter range as was once believed.

How do hummers survive in the cold? The fact they are here in numbers means there are enough insects and tree sap to support them. Many insects are active even in low temperatures. Of course, because nectar is a significant part of their diet, your feeder will provide a great supplement for winter's natural food sources.

Hummingbirds protect themselves from hypothermia by going into torpor, a state of temporary hibernation, featuring deep sleep with greatly decreased body temperature and metabolic rate which allows them to conserve energy.

If you try to attract winter hummers, be sure to take the feeder inside when the temperature is expected to be below twenty-eight degrees to keep the water from freezing. A feeder located under trees or the overhang of your house also offers protection from freezing. Some birdwatchers locate their feeder so that the morning sun warms the water while hummers are still shaking off their torpor.

Do not worry about the leaving your feeder up and consequently endangering your summer hummingbirds by postponing their migration. Their migration is triggered by hormonal changes based on the photoperiod (length of day) and not the food supply or temperature.

No matter the time of year, there are a few basic rules for feeding hummingbirds. Prepare sugar water by dissolving one part sugar in four parts hot water and let cool before filling your feeder. The water does not have to be red so I recommend staying away from store-bought “nectar” and other products that contain red dye. The ratio of sugar to water should not be increased to lower the freezing point because it may make the birds sick

I also recommend cleaning feeders with warm soapy water and replacing the sugar water every two or three days during the summer. However, due to slower fermentation rates during cold weather, feeders may need cleaning and refilling less often.

What if you have a hummer at your feeder after November 1? Submit a report to Susan Campbell at: <http://naturalsciences.org/nchummers/reportform.html>. Also, call me and I'll photograph and help identify your bird. If need be, I will forward a photo to Susan for confirmation.

She may want to visit and band your bird. Even if you think it is a Ruby-throated Hummingbird, please report so she can track “late” hummers and investigate in case it is a Black-chinned Hummingbird, a species similar in appearance.

John Ennis

Jo O'Keefe is a nature photographer. Her main focus is marine life; however, she also has a good number of photos of birds and other wildlife on her website. To see her collection of Rufous photos go to: http://www.okeefes.org/Birds/Rufous_Hummingbird/Rufous_Hummingbird.htm



