



The oldest opened its eyes on May 19 soon after this photo was taken



By May 25, the oldest (right) had more of its contour feathers showing

Brunswick Wildlife Want to see photos of my grandkids?

Kathy and Bob Gustafson are grandparents! A neighbor who is a friend and fellow birder emailed me about a hummingbird nest they located. Bob was working in the yard and noticed a female Ruby-throated Hummingbird fly into a tree near their house. While not really grandparents...yet...they were thrust into the role of being surrogate grandparents for two baby hummingbirds.

We arranged for me to come by and take baby pictures. The nest was just outside their attic window so it was very convenient to wait behind my camouflaged netting for the mother to return with a fresh mixture of insects to regurgitate into the wide open bills.

From May 19-28, I visited four times to document the nestling's progress using a telephoto lens from less than ten feet away. On my first visit I found a beautiful yard adorned with seed and hummingbird feeders, bluebird boxes, and a wonderful selection of nectar-bearing plants to attract butterflies. Immediately, I asked the Gustafson's to adopt me. Just kidding but...

The female Ruby-throated Hummingbird selects the nest site and she alone builds the nest over a period of five to ten days. Her speed and skills are to be admired given the intricate construction. The cup nest is composed mostly of plant down such as dandelion and thistle, held together with strands of spider web. The exterior is shingled with lichen which provides very effective camouflage.

Nests are built under a fairly thick canopy of leaves as you can tell by the photos, to minimize temperature changes from the sun during the day and heat loss due to radiant cooling at night.

My best guess was that the babies were about nine days old since the oldest was starting to open its eyes. A hummingbird's clutch is typically two eggs with the second being laid one to three days after the first. Since she starts incubation as soon as the first egg is laid, one nestling will hatch a day or so before the second. This is called asynchronous hatching.

From then on we could tell which was the oldest by its stage of development. Like many other species, especially songbirds, hummingbirds are born naked and unable to maintain body temperature, a condition call "altricial". Conversely, the term "precocial" refers to hatchlings that are relatively mature, downy, and mobile within hours of hatching such as many ducks and shorebirds.

The mother provides all direct care of the young, feeding them by regurgitation. When the chicks are about fifteen days old, she will start delivering small insects in her bill to wean them from their baby formula.

Kathy witnessed the first developmental milestone. For a day or so after hatching, the female removes fecal sacs. Thereafter, the little guys eject feces over side of nest. Now that's what I call toilet training!

Other notable developmental stages are growth of pinfeathers (around day seven), opening of their eyes (around day nine), and the start of wing exercises to build strength (around day fifteen).

Pin feathers are contour body feathers that are growing in a sheath. They give the young the appearance of looking somewhat like a pin cushion. The sheath eventually breaks away and the contour feather within it unfurls.

The female stops brooding about the time the eyes are open, primarily because the nestlings are able to maintain their body temperature. Older nestling usually leaves the nest between eighteen and twenty-two days with its sibling following when it is approximately the same age.

Two questions are frequently asked by those who feed hummingbirds. What happens if a feeder is emptied and the owner is out of town and why do hummingbirds seem to almost disappear from feeders at various times during the spring and summer?

The answer to both questions involves insects. Insects are the primary food of hummingbirds, supplemented by natural nectar and hummingbird feeders. Insects were the nestling's diet...the protein provided for the rapid growth shown in the photos.

So when you are missing your female hummingbird, it is probably because she is incubating or feeding her brood. By August, there should be plenty of activity at your feeder because the birds will be "carbo-loading" to accumulate fat to fuel their migration. Of course, the

activity at your feeder is also affected by spring and fall migrations of birds that breed to our north.

Kathy witnessed the oldest baby fledging on May 28. Just after being fed, it climbed up on the edge of the nest. The mother came in and fed it again and seemed to encourage it to leave the nest...it worked.

After receiving Kathy's phone call, I arrived about 45 minutes later, having moved up my planned 10AM visit. This was good timing because I could still locate the fledgling in the nest tree, approximately twelve feet above the nest.

All along you could tell which baby was older...by the timing of their eyes opening, start of wing exercises, and replacement of pin feathers with contour feathers. I knew the remaining nestling would fledge in the next day or two since it seemed to have all of its contour feathers and was now exercising its wings. Kathy saw the second baby leave the nest...almost forty-eight hours after the first.

The mother will feed the babies up to a week or so after they fledge. For the interim, as long as the younger bird is still in the nest, she will make separate deliveries. By the time the second nestling had fledged, Kathy was already seeing the first fledgling visit their hummingbird feeder.

Will the Gustafson's experience avian empty nest symptom? Not to worry. At the end of May, they had already had four bluebirds fledge from one nest box and there were still five nestlings in their other box plus there is a good possibility that the hummingbirds will have a second brood this summer and use the same nest.

As self-proclaimed Godfather to the hummingbirds will I suffer from empty nest syndrome? Not likely. This spring and summer I have also taken baby pictures of eagles, sparrows, robins, doves, storks, pelicans, egrets, and ibises. By the end of the summer, I will have had my fill of nestlings and fledglings...until next year!

John Ennis



Separate meals were served
as of May 28



The first fledgling was still nearby



I'm planning a "coming out"
party for May 30