

ANNA'S HUMMINGBIRD IN BINGHAMTON, NEW YORK

Robert J. Grosek

8½ Newton Street, Binghamton NY 13901

ABSTRACT — A male Anna's Hummingbird (*Calypte anna*) was observed in Binghamton, Broome County, New York on 18 November 1998. It remained at the same site until 11 December 1998, when it was captured and taken indoors. This is the first record of its appearance in New York State. A field description of the bird and circumstances surrounding its discovery and identification are presented.

INTRODUCTION

In the northeastern United States, only a single species, the Ruby-throated Hummingbird (*Archilochus colubris*), represents the hummingbird family. This species is regularly sighted in the Binghamton area as a migrant and a breeder. It typically arrives in Binghamton around the first of May and is last seen in September before it heads south to Mexico. Ornithologists who summarize bird sightings note that the Ruby-throated Hummingbird has usually left upstate New York by the third week in September (Pettingill and Hoyt 1963) and has left southern New Jersey by the third week in October (Sibley 1997). Of course, isolated records have occurred beyond these departure dates. D'Anna (1998) cites sightings of the ruby-throat in New York State as late as November and December.

The Rufous Hummingbird (*Selasphorus rufus*) was the only other hummingbird recorded in New York State (Rising 1998). Like the Rufous Hummingbird, all other hummingbirds in the United States are found west of the Mississippi River. These hummingbirds, for the most part, migrate to the south at the end of the breeding season out of the United States. For some species, such as the Allen's and the Costa's, the northernmost part of their wintering range is in the southwest United States.

The one species that does not migrate out of its breeding area is the Anna's Hummingbird. It breeds from northern Mexico to northern British Columbia, and eastwards to Arizona. The highest density of Anna's Hummingbirds exists in California, followed by Arizona. Its typical wintering range extends eastwards to Alabama (Russell 1996, AOU 1998).

Although Anna's Hummingbird is a permanent resident within its range, it is not static within. This hummingbird often moves to lower elevations in the winter and many individual birds migrate westward from Arizona to California to escape the summer desert heat (Kaufman 1996). These birds return to Arizona in the late summer. In addition, there is some noticeable range expansion occurring, generally south and north, and to some degree, to the east

of its current range. This expansion may be due to an increase in population as well as to the availability of more nectar feeders (Stokes & Stokes 1989). Also, other movement northward and eastward is not unprecedented. For example, Long (1997) reports Anna's Hummingbird sightings as far north as Alaska and as far east as Florida. At the end of November 1998, there were two other sightings of an Anna's Hummingbird on the East Coast. One was in Smyrna, Georgia, and the other was in Charlotte, North Carolina (Henderson 1998). However, there are no reported sightings of this species above the Mason-Dixon Line (Long 1997, AOU 1998). The presence of an Anna's Hummingbird in New York State exceeds all expectations.

DISCOVERY OF THE HUMMINGBIRD

On 17 November 1998, at the home of Bernice Greenmun, Harriet Marsi saw a hummingbird that appeared different from a Ruby-throated. That evening, notice went out on the telephone birding network informing members of the Broome Naturalists' Club that a possible Rufous Hummingbird was seen at Greenmun's feeder. At first light of 18 November, Bill Howard and I arrived at the feeder. We first saw the bird at 6:37 AM. Although the sky was still overcast and dark, there was sufficient light to determine that the bird was not a Rufous Hummingbird. This bird exhibited a well defined gorget, making it a male. Had it been a Rufous Hummingbird, a brick-red color would have been visible on the back, belly, or tail. We saw only green. Acting on the assumption that there was only one other likely species of hummingbird in our area, we felt that we were looking at a Ruby-throated Hummingbird and we did not further attempt to identify this bird.

Later in the morning I discussed the bird with the Naturalist' Club member who originally disseminated news of this bird and learned that there were two hummingbirds regularly appearing at the feeders. I returned to the hummingbird site at approximately 9:30 AM and within moments was joined by Sadie Dorber and later, by Marie Petuh and Chris Barnes.

Over the next one and one-half hours we observed the hummingbird. The sky cleared and the bird often perched on exposed branches in direct sunlight. This bird appeared to some members of this group as being larger than a Ruby-throated Hummingbird and because of the color on the crown, it was clear that we were not looking at a Ruby-throated Hummingbird. Noting several field marks, including the way that the iridescent color extended over the crown of the bird and the pattern of color on the breast, I identified this bird to be Anna's Hummingbird.

Other hummingbirds have iridescent color on their crowns as well, but they do not have the breast pattern or color that this bird has. For example, while the Violet-crowned Hummingbird has an iridescent crown, it also has a white breast. The Magnificent Hummingbird also has an iridescent crown, but its breast is

extremely dark. Costa's Hummingbird also has iridescence on its crown, but this color extends much further down the neck and torso of the bird than on an Anna's. Furthermore, the Costa's iridescent color is blue-violet (Griggs 1997). Other field marks also separate the Costa's, Magnificent, and Violet-crowned hummingbirds from the Anna's Hummingbird.

During our observation, the bird typically sat on the top of a lilac bush, leaving only to fly to a feeder for a sip of nectar (Photo 1). Feedings were brief, always less than a minute at a time. Sometimes the bird would fly off out of sight for 5 minutes or longer before returning.

Over the next 12 days, I observed the bird many times, at many angles, and under many lighting conditions, from overhead bright sunlight to darker overcast rainy or snowy days. At times I was as close as 25 feet. I saw the hummingbird through 7X power Swarovski binoculars, used Kowa and Swarovski spotting scopes with 20 to 60X viewing lenses, and videotaped the bird with a Sony 300X digital camcorder. At the site I dictated notes into a micro-cassette recorder and sketched details of the bird on a note pad.

I have previously observed Anna's as well as other hummingbirds on birding trips outside of the northeast. However, I do not consider myself well versed in the identification of hummingbirds. As I observed the bird with other birders, we often verbalized to one another field marks and characteristics that we saw on the bird. We had field guides available that we looked at when the bird was not in sight.

I was conscious of the size of the bird. The base of the bird feeder was approximately 2 inches in length, and an attempt to size the bird by comparing it to that measure. Anna's Hummingbird varies in size from 3.5 to 4.0 inches (89-101 mm) (Long 1997). There is no more than a 0.5-inch difference between it and the other 15 or so hummingbirds that are likely to be seen in North America. As Kaufman (1990) suggests, size of a hummingbird is not a reliable field mark for inexperienced birders, especially if there are no other hummingbirds around for comparison.

GENERAL IMPRESSION

This bird exhibited rapid acceleration, quick flight, and the abilities to fly backward and to hover in place while sipping nectar. This bird appeared to be less than 4 inches from the base of the bill to the tip of its tail feathers. The bird was bright green with a sooty white breast, and an iridescent color on its throat and crown that often flashed when the bird turned its head.

FIELD DESCRIPTION

Body, Tail, and Wings: The back was iridescent green. The tail feathers were also green. The folded wing against the body of the perched bird appeared a darker shade of green, closer to black, than the body color. On some

occasions, I saw a small patch of white feathers near the top of the folded wing. This white appeared to be a patch of downy feathers and was not always visible.

Head and Throat: An iridescent coloring was evident on the crown of the head, the throat or gorget, and about the eye. This coloring appeared to be in three parts when viewed from the side. One part covered the gorget, a second part covered the crown, and a third part formed an oval behind the eye. The iridescent coloring on the throat and crown were joined when viewing the bird head on, but the oval behind the eye was separated from the rest of the coloring regardless of the viewing angle. Such a separation is not noted in the field guides. Over each eye was a thin light eye stripe and immediately behind each eye was a white area. Most of the time the iridescent patch appeared black unless the light caught the feathers in such a way to flash color. When it did, I saw red, magenta, or rosy pink colors at different times but never blue or violet. The color was most evident when the bird hovered by the feeder and less so when he stretched his neck while perched.

Sometimes the feathers on the crown were ruffled. When viewed in profile, there was a small spot of white beneath the base of the bill. Viewed from straight on, there appeared to be a mustache. Upon closer inspection through a spotting scope, the white spot and the mustache can be explained by white feathers that stuck out on either side of the base of the bill.

Chest, Belly, and Undertail: The white breast appeared sooty because of green breast feathers that often looked dark gray when in less than optimum light. This breast color was darker at the wings, giving a vest-like appearance. A narrow strip of pure white feathers separated the throat gorget and the sooty breast feathers. This gave the appearance of a quarter inch white collar just below the gorget. The undertail covert area was also white.

Bare Parts: The blackish bill appeared to be a bit longer than the width of the head, perhaps 1 1/8 times as wide. The bill was generally straight, but on closer inspection there was a suggestion of a slight downward curve. The eye color was totally black. When the bird perched, its breast feathers covered the legs.

Vocalizations: On many occasions I heard the hummingbird make a sharp "electric" call note when it flew to the feeder early in the morning. The bird usually did not make this sound after full daylight. However, the bird would sometimes string several notes together when perched on the lilac bush.

Field Comparison: Bernice Greenmun initially reported to the Naturalists' Club that a second hummingbird was also present at her feeders. On 18 November we briefly saw a second hummingbird. The Anna's Hummingbird flew to a nearby blue spruce tree and was joined by a second hummingbird. That second bird briefly interacted with the Anna's and then flew seemingly deeper into the spruce. Five birders witnessed this brief encounter. This second bird

appeared before us for less than 2 seconds and was shaded by the darkness of the tree. No identification of this second hummingbird was possible. This second bird was never seen at any other time and there were no other hummingbirds in the area.

DISCUSSION

Behavior: This bird's behavior is consistent with that of other Anna's Hummingbirds. This Anna's Hummingbird chose the Greenmun's garden for its territory. Flower gardens are typical Anna's Hummingbird habitats (Ehrlich and others 1988). For most of the day, the hummingbird sat in the topmost limbs of the lilac bush. Sitting atop the highest branches of a bush or tree, and leaving this perch only to feed, is also typical of the male hummingbird (Stokes & Stokes 1989). When it returned from feeding at the feeder, it often returned to the same limb on the lilac bush. Russell (1996) notes that Anna's Hummingbird is intolerant of other hummingbirds. From a strategic perch, the Anna's Hummingbird defends its feeding territory (Ehrlich and others, 1988). This may have been the case when the Anna's Hummingbird interacted with the unidentified hummingbird on the afternoon of 18 November, as noted above.

When the hummingbird came to the feeders early in the morning, it made a sharp "electric" popping call note, common to this species. By contrast, the call note of the Ruby-throat is described as a squeaky sound while that of the Rufous Hummingbird is a low chip note (Long 1997 and others). This bird sang from its perch, a behavior that is not observed in all hummingbirds, but is common among the Anna's Hummingbird (Robbins and others 1983)

Banding: In addition to the field marks detailed above, on 22 November the Anna's Hummingbird was briefly captured and banded by Bill Pantle, a licensed bird bander. Standard length measurements and weight were recorded by the bander and were submitted to the New York State Avian Records Committee. While the bird was "in hand", it was photographed (Photo 2) and videotaped.

Presence in Binghamton: Some anecdotal information exists on how long the bird may have been present in the Binghamton area. Greenmun noted that the hummingbirds were coming to her feeder for three weeks before she announced the presence of this bird. Two weeks prior to that, she had taken down her feeders for the winter. It was only after her granddaughter noticed the hummingbird repeatedly flying where the feeder previously hung, did Greenmun return the feeder to the porch. If this information is accurate, Greenmun would have removed the feeder around 13 October, five weeks before the identification of the bird.

Over the first week of its discovery, over 200 birders came to Binghamton to observe the bird. The identification held up over time. Reports were sent to NYSARC. Internet postings and several newspaper articles appeared, including Marsi (1998).

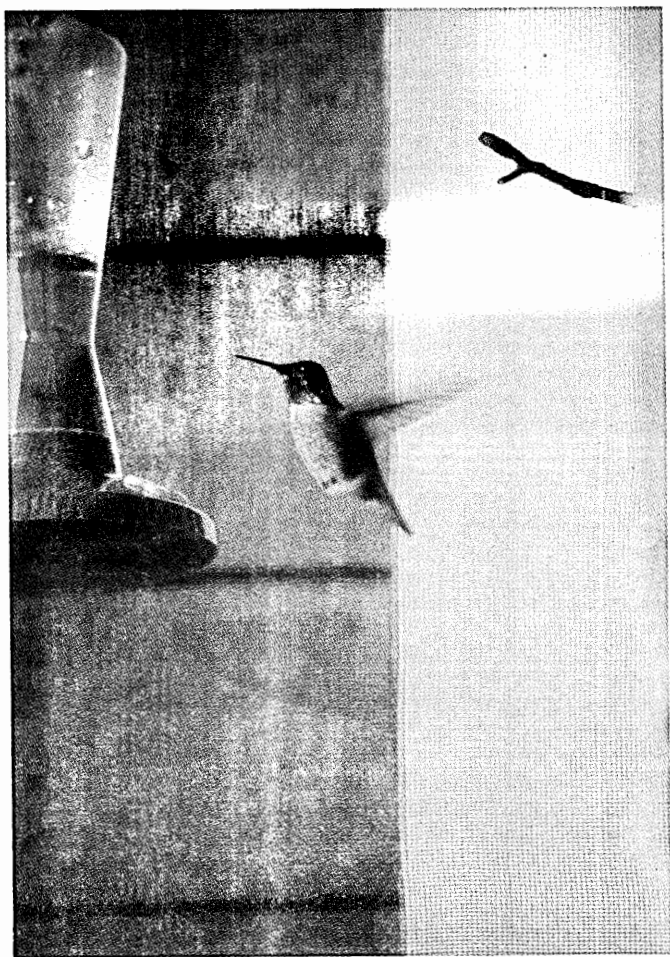


Photo 1. Anna's Hummingbird in flight. Photo by Sara Kinch.

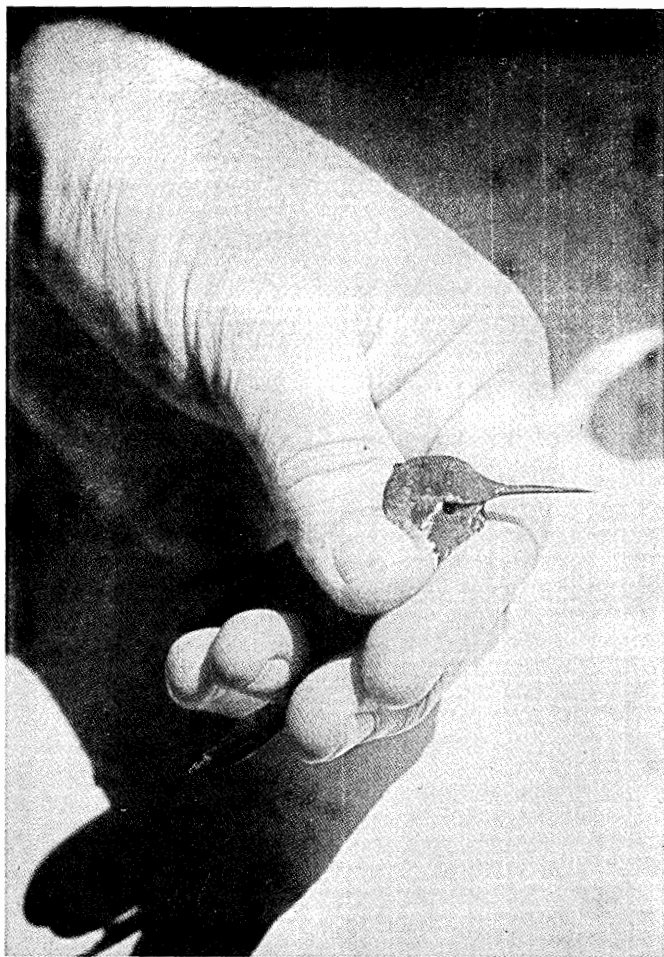


Photo 2. Anna's Hummingbird held by bander. Photo by Sara Kinch.

The Anna's Hummingbird was captured on 11 December 1998 by Arnette Heidecamp, a licensed rehabilitator, and taken to Saugerties (Reilly 1999).

Controversy: Last year, almost to the day, a birder in Wilmington Delaware left his nectar feeder up longer than he usually does and was rewarded with the appearance of an Allen's Hummingbird (Rohrbacher 1998). Every year there are reports of Rufous Hummingbirds passing through the northeast in the fall (Long 1997), and in recent years, a Black-chinned Hummingbird found its way to southern New Jersey (Sibley 1997).

As more birders leave their feeders up during the colder months, we can expect more sightings of these fascinating and colorful little birds. This altruistic behavior however, may lead to ethical conflicts. Do the feeders extend a welcome comfort to birds that are off their course, or do the feeders encourage the birds to linger in a harsh winter environment as long as their bodies can hold out? If humankind is putting the hummingbirds in jeopardy by maintaining winter feeders, do they have a responsibility to assist the birds?

A lively discussion developed on the internet over the merits of capturing the Binghamton hummingbird and transporting it back to the west. Some birders saw a little bird in need of a helping hand. Others thought that nature should run its course. Here the vitality of the species was never in question; rather, one bird was facing a cold winter. In the future, it is for certain that other birds will stray into New York State. The controversy surrounding the Anna's Hummingbird causes us to examine our role in nature and forces the question of just how far can we manipulate nature without endangering the very wildlife we seek to protect.

SUMMARY

There is sufficient evidence to identify this bird as Anna's Hummingbird. It is the first recorded sighting of this species in New York State and is a milestone for birders in our area to study it in the wild. Recently some unusual birds have been reported in New York, some for the first time ever. These bird sightings are reminders that we must take note of the seemingly ordinary and not take for granted the identification of any bird. Any uncommon field mark that a bird exhibits should draw our attention like a magnet. Above all, we should put our fears aside to report an unusual sighting, even if our first impression of the bird's identification falls short of perfection. Had the birder who originally observed this bird hesitated on reporting it, we all would have been bereft of the pleasure the Anna's Hummingbird brought to us.

LITERATURE CITED

- American Ornithologist' Union. 1998. *Calypte anna* (Lesson). Anna's Hummingbird. In: *Check-List of North American Birds*. 7th Ed. Washington, DC: American Ornithologist' Union. p 310.
- D'Anna W. 1998. Ruby-throated Hummingbird *Archilochus colubris*. In: Levine E, Editor. *Bull's Birds of New York State*. Ithaca, NY: Comstock Publishing Associates, Cornell University Press. p 345-346.
- Ehrlich P, Dobkin D, Wheye D. 1988. Nonvocal sounds. Anna's Hummingbird. Range expansion. In: *The Birder's Handbook*. New York, NY: Simon and Schuster. p 313,315; 330-331; 459,461,463.
- Griggs J. 1997. Aerialist hummingbirds. In: *All the Birds of North America*. New York, NY: Harper Collins Publishers. p 82-84.
- Henderson B. 1998 Dec 4 Fri. Rare bird finds perfect host. Anna's Hummingbird drops by Audubon president's house. *The Charlotte [NC] Observer*: 24.
- Kaufman K. 1990. Hummingbirds. Group I: Small plain species. *Field Guide to Advanced Birding*. Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin. p 162-166.
- Kaufman K. 1996. Anna's Hummingbird. In: *Lives of North American Birds*. Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin. p 344-346.
- Long K. 1997. *Hummingbirds: A Wildlife Handbook*. Boulder, Co. Johnson Printing. p 16, 25, 30-33.
- Marsi R. 1998 Nov 23 Mon. Rare hummingbird visits Tier. Birders flock to city home. *Press & Sun-Bulletin* [Binghamton, NY]; 14(54): 1A,6A.
- Pettingill O, Hoyt S. 1963. *Enjoying Birds in Upstate New York*. Ithaca, NY: Laboratory of Ornithology, Cornell University. p 16, 70.
- Reilly J. 1999 Jan 3 Sun. On nature. Wayward hummingbird finds refuge in Saugerties. *Syracuse Herald American* 118(36,168) CNY: AA1.
- Rising G. 1998. Rufous Hummingbird *Selasphorus rufus*. In: Levine E, Editor. *Bull's Birds of New York State*. Ithaca, NY: Comstock Publishing Associates, Cornell University Press. p 346-347.
- Rohrbacher F. 1998. An Allen's Hummingbird winters in Delaware. *Delmarva Ornithologist* 30: 12-14.
- Russell SM. Anna's Hummingbird. In: Poole A, Gill F, Editors. *The Birds of North America*. Philadelphia, PA, The Academy of Natural Sciences; Washington, DC: American Ornithologist' Union. # 226, p 1-24.
- Sibley D. 1997. *Birds of Cape May*. Cape May, NJ: New Jersey Audubon Society's Cape May Bird Observatory. p 74, 135.
- Stokes D, Stokes L. 1989. *Hummingbirds*. Boston, MA: Little, Brown, and Co. p 48-53

=