

Vagrant Hummingbirds in New York State

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Introduction

The astonishing increase in recent years in the numbers of western hummingbirds recorded in eastern North America defies explanation and challenges efforts at record keeping. Whereas Conway and Drennan (1979) were able to list all prior records of Rufous Hummingbirds (*Selasphorus rufus*) in the East, it has by now become impossible to enumerate even those of a single season. New York State's experience has, on a smaller scale, mirrored that of the rest of the East over this period. From Carleton's (1981) first NYS report of a Rufous Hummingbird in 1980, through an accretion of fully substantiated records of this species in the state, to the presence of three species of hummingbirds along a short stretch of the lower Hudson River last fall—NY has shared eastern North America's expanding fortunes in the occurrence of vagrant hummingbirds.

In the present paper, we provide details concerning two Calliope Hummingbirds (*Stellula calliope*), one Rufous Hummingbird, and one *Archilochus* sp. present in Manhattan and Yonkers during the late fall/early winter of 2001-02, summarize what is known through 2001 about the occurrence of vagrant hummingbirds in NY and illustrate the current status of western hummingbirds throughout the East by compiling published records from the fall of 2000. For NY records, we use the term *vagrants* not only for all hummingbirds other than the familiar Ruby-throated (*A. colubris*), but also for birds identified as Ruby-throated outside of that species' expected dates of occurrence (approximately 15 Apr-15 Oct).

Hummingbirds on the Hudson, Nov 2001-Jan 2002

As will be seen below, the lower Hudson River Valley had already distinguished itself as a focus of hummingbird vagrancy before the fall of 2001. At least four different *Selasphorus* hummingbirds (including NY's first fully documented Rufous) were present during the fall of 1993 at three sites in Orange County, The Bronx, and Manhattan—and another Rufous was present in Dec 1996 across the state line in Bergen County, NJ (Walsh et al. 1999). Thus, a precedent existed for the events of Nov 2001, when NY birders flocked to an eight mile stretch of the Hudson to study four hummingbirds of three species: NY's first Calliope Hummingbirds, what was surely one of NY's most obliging Rufous



Rufous Hummingbird 23 Nov 2001
Lenoir Nature Preserve
Yonkers, Westchester Co.
Kevin McGowan

Hummingbirds ever, and a less obliging *Archilochus* that some thought just might have been NY's first Black-chinned Hummingbird (*A. alexandri*).

On 17 Nov 2001, Tomi Ito-Goldman, a volunteer for the butterfly garden at Lenoir Nature Preserve in Yonkers, Westchester County, informed MB that a hummingbird was present at the Preserve. Given the date, MB's curiosity was piqued and within ten minutes of his arrival, the bird made a brief appearance. The presence of rufous on its sides and in the tail convinced MB that he had a *Selasphorus* hummingbird, and he made a few calls to alert others. Rich Guthrie made it to Lenoir and saw the bird as light was fading. Two days later, MB obtained excellent views of the shape, width, and color pattern of its tail feathers and confirmed its identity as a Rufous—as opposed to the

exceedingly similar Allen's (*S. sasin*) and the very similar Broad-tailed (*S. platycercus*). A week later, he was able to document the diagnostic features photographically, and a parade of birders had begun filing through the Preserve.

The 'small gorgeted hummingbirds' (i.e., hummingbirds of the genera *Archilochus*, *Calypte*, *Stellula*, and *Selasphorus*) are notoriously difficult to identify. Females and immatures in particular pose enormous obstacles to confident identification because many of the critical features require in-hand examination or exceptionally close and prolonged views for accurate assessment (Pyle 1997). Howell's (2002) superb photographic guide—the first work available to North American birders that synthesizes state of the art identification criteria for this group and presents them from the point of view of a field observer, rather than a bander—was still on the horizon during the late fall of 2001 when the events related here unfolded.

Around the time that the Yonkers Rufous was discovered, news of two hummingbirds at Fort Tryon Park in northern Manhattan, New York County, came to the attention of the birding community. Both were female/immature types, and both were initially identified as likely Ruby-throated because they lacked the conspicuous and extensive rufous coloration characteristic of even immature *Selasphorus*. As far as we are aware, Tom Burke was the first observer to raise a third possibility—the one that ultimately proved correct—when he suggested on 1 Dec that neither was an *Archilochus* and that at least one might have been a Calliope. On 2 Dec, MB patiently studied first one, and then, after hours of waiting, the other of the Fort Tryon birds. His conclusion, based on the presence

of an elongated, violet gorget feather on the first bird and on several structural features shared by both, was that both were likely Calliopes. This conclusion was amply confirmed by many subsequent observers, including some, like Paul Lehman, with cutting-edge expertise gained through experience in western North America and through study of previous extralimital Calliopes in Cape May, New Jersey.

Both the Calliopes and the Lenoir Rufous remained accessible over the next several days, and the intense scrutiny they received led to another discovery. On 7 Dec, Hugh Martin found a second hummingbird at Lenoir Preserve. This bird lacked the rufous in the tail characteristic of *Selasphorus*, and it lacked the structural attributes (now well-known in NY!) of Calliope. Indeed, it appeared to be either a Ruby-throated or the exceedingly similar Black-chinned. The unidentified *Archilochus* was seen by a number of observers on 7 and 8 Dec. Among these, Andy Guthrie obtained several photographs and posted a detailed description of this bird and its discovery at <http://home.earthlink.net/~andyguthrie/ny_archilochus.htm>. Circumstances made it difficult to view critical features (such as the precise shape of the outer primaries) distinguishing female/immature Ruby-throated from Black-chinned Hummingbirds. Thus the bird remained '*Archilochus* sp.' throughout its stay.

The Rufous Hummingbird at Lenoir was seen daily from 17 Nov to 27 Dec, and it was last noted on 5-6 Jan 2002 (MB). Both the Rufous and the *Archilochus* sp. were recorded on the Bronx-Westchester CBC on 23 Dec (the last date known for the latter bird). The Calliopes at Fort Tryon were recorded on the Lower Hudson CBC 16 Dec and were last reported 27 Dec (NYC RBA, eBirds NYC). As of May 2002, photographs and accounts of these birds were available on the Hudson River Audubon web site: <<http://www.hras.org/sela.html>> and links therein.

Records of vagrant hummingbirds in NYS

Ruby-throated Hummingbird (*Archilochus colubris*)

Early Nov-10 Dec 1988, Jamestown, Chautauqua (R. Sundell, KB 39:107)
Visiting feeder; netted and taken into captivity; died 11 Dec; disposition ?

26 Nov-13 Dec 1961, Riis Park, Queens (D'Anna 1998)

24 Nov 98 Riis Park, Queens (R. Veit, SSM, mob; KB 49: 94)

Identified by shape of outer primaries and other characters

Archilochus species

7-23 Dec 2001 Lenoir Nature Preserve, Yonkers, Westchester
(A. Guthrie, in litt.; this paper)

Anna's Hummingbird (*Calypte anna*)

18 Nov-11 Dec 1998, Binghamton, Broome (Grosek 1998, NYSARC 2001)
Adult male visiting feeder; taken into captivity; reportedly released in spring
(A. Heidebach, fide E. Levine,).

Calliope Hummingbird (*Stellula calliope*)

Two, mid Nov-27 Dec 2001, Fort Tryon Park, New York (this paper)
Immature males feeding on floral nectar

Rufous Hummingbird (*Selasphorus rufus*)

9 Aug 1993, Chester, Orange (J. Tramantano, KB 43:346, NYSARC 1995)
Adult male

Oct-3 Dec 1994, Cambridge, Washington (NYSARC 1996)
Adult male visiting feeder; taken into captivity 3 Dec; died 9 Dec; disposition?

4-6 Oct 1996, Colden, Erie (NYSARC 1999)
Photographed

22-28 Nov 2000 Water Mill, Suffolk (H. McGuinness, mob; KB 51: 565)
Adult female; taken into captivity 28 Nov; died 5 Dec; specimen to AMNH
(#833853), where re-examined by SSM 25 Apr 2002

18-28 Oct 2001, Panama, Chautauqua. (R. Miga, J. Berry, R. Sundell;
KB 52: 54) Photograph and report to NYSARC

17 Nov 2001-6 Jan 2002. Lenoir Nat. Pres., Yonkers, Westchester Co.
(this paper) Immature male

***Selasphorus* species**

To our knowledge, no objective reasons exist suggesting that any of the records in this section pertain to Broad-tailed Hummingbird. Although we follow original sources in designating these records '*Selasphorus sp.*', we recommend that, in the future, observers and editors use the term 'Rufous/Allen's' for this category of records.

3-13 Sep 1980, Elizabethtown, Essex (Carleton 1981, NYSARC 1981)

21 Jul 1988, Ulysses, Tompkins (S. Sibley, NYSARC 1990)
Visiting feeder

- Sep-Oct 1993, Saugerties, Ulster (NYSARC 1996)
 16 Nov 1993, Wave Hill, Bronx (B. Loeb, KB 44:79)
 Two, 18-24 Nov 1993, Manhattan
 (T. Burke, H. McGuinness, mob; KB 44:79)
 22 Nov-1 Dec 1993, Floral Park, Queens
 (A. Lauro, KB 44:79, NYSARC 1996)
 3 Sep 2000, Port Byron, Cayuga
 (D. Trumble, Paxton et al. 2001)
 25-28 Nov 2000, East Hampton, Suffolk
 (J. Ross, H. McGuinness, KB 51: 565)
 Several others implied by Rising (1998)



Hummingbird species

- 18 Nov 1998, Binghamton (Grosek 1998)
 Nov 2000, Orient (fide H. McGuinness)

Calliope Hummingbird 2 Dec 2001
 Fort Tryon Park, Manhattan
 New York Co.
 Mike Bochnick

Vagrant hummingbirds in eastern NA, Aug 2000-Feb 2001

The Regional Reports in the first two issues of Volume 55 of *North American Birds* document the presence of no fewer than eleven species of hummingbirds east of Texas during the period Aug 2000-Feb 2001. As noted above, NY recorded one Rufous, two *Selasphorus* sp., and one hummingbird sp. during this period. Records outside of NY were as follows:

Late Ruby-throated Hummingbirds were noted in TN (two 24 Oct), IA (11 Nov), MD (two), the Southern Atlantic Coast Region ('a smattering'), Florida (13 in five counties, Dec-Feb), and presumably elsewhere along the Gulf Coast. Black-chinned was specifically identified in NC (four), SC (one), coastal GA (three), Appalachian GA (one), FL (two-three), and presumably elsewhere along the Gulf Coast. Thus, the scattered reports of late *Archilochus* sp. north to VA and DC cannot be assigned to either species on the basis of default probability.

Calliope Hummingbirds were recorded at Cape May, NJ (the state's second); Suffolk, VA (the state's and the Region's first); GA (five banded statewide were the state's third through seventh); TN (the state's second and third); western NC (probable); FL (the state's twelfth and thirteenth); AL (the state's ninth through twelfth); MS; and LA.

Rufous Hummingbirds were identified in MA (one), CT (three), eastern PA (one), DE (one), MD (two), VA (one), NC ('several'), SC ('several'), GA ('too many to mention'), FL (four), TN (five), MI (two), and WI (one). In the Middlewestern Prairie Region, this species was recorded ten times and was

described as 'becoming quite regular' (Brock 2001), and so many were found in the Central Southern region that only records from unusual inland localities were mentioned by Jackson (2001) and Cooley (2001). In addition, many birds were reported as simply '*Selasphorus* sp.': MA (one), CT (one), eastern PA (four), NJ (one), MD (three), VA (one), FL (11+), western PA (one), TN (one), western NC (one), and WI (three).

Despite the numerical predominance of Rufous Hummingbirds among vagrant *Selasphorus*, both Allen's and Broad-tailed were well documented in eastern NA during the fall of 2000. The Allen's Hummingbird present at Cape May, NJ 11-15 Nov was the first for NJ and the second for the Hudson-Delaware Region. AL also recorded its 15th Allen's during this season. Records of Broad-tailed Hummingbirds included GA's third, FL's second and third, AL's fifth, and one in MS.

Rounding out the species that occur in the east fairly regularly, Buff-bellied Hummingbird was recorded in LA, AL, western FL, and Cedar Key, FL during the fall of 2000. The rarest of the rare during the fall of 2000 were a Green Violet-ear in AR, GA's third Anna's, WI's first Broad-billed (with another in LA), and the USA's first Green-breasted Mango outside of Texas (Concord, NC 12 Nov-4 Dec).

Conclusions

If the incursion of western hummingbirds to the East during the fall of 2000 was unprecedented (warranting superlatives like 'amazing' and 'astounding' throughout the Regional Reports), it nevertheless failed to auger the even greater flight of 2001, the full scope of which is still emerging. A comparison of CBC results for the two years reveals that Dec 2001-Jan 2002 produced 223 Rufous and 91 Rufous/Allen's in 11 states east of TX (including NY, NJ, and DE), whereas the previous season (the one described in detail above) produced 179 Rufous and 56 Rufous/Allen's (BirdSource). Although it is impossible to predict how far into the future this dizzying upward trend will extend, it seems clear that southern and western hummingbird species will continue to appear in eastern North America, including NY, and that new state records will continue to accrue.

Coincident with this distributional revolution, an ethical debate has emerged. A perception exists that maintenance of feeders late into the fall encourages hummingbirds to linger later into the season than they otherwise would—and later than they 'should' for their own well-being. Fazio (1995) discusses several aspects of this perception. Also, some wildlife rehabilitators have supported intervening on behalf of late-lingering hummingbirds by taking them into captivity for relocation to warmer regions or release during the spring (Frink 1998).

A serious obstacle to the former perception is the ongoing extraordinary rarity of late-season Ruby-throated Hummingbirds in the Northeast. As an abundant breeding species in this region, this species ought to be, by orders of magnitude, the most likely to be deflected from its normal migratory movements if feeders actually had this sort of nefarious influence. The fact that the Ruby-throated

remains much rarer than the Rufous in particular (and other western species in aggregate) in the Northeast and Mid-Atlantic regions in late fall suggests that feeders are not directly responsible for the trends described above. Likewise, the frequency with which hummingbirds taken into captivity for rehabilitation, transfer, or release in spring, actually die while under care does not provide a great deal of support for this approach. Even worse, it is not clear that specimens thus procured often make their way to scientific collections, where they could, in theory, help greatly to document changes in distribution.

Interestingly, hummingbird researchers such as Bob Sargent have demonstrated that Rufous, Calliope, and other hummingbirds can tolerate surprisingly cold weather in eastern North America; that they almost invariably use, in addition to feeders, such natural resources as floral nectar, sapsucker wells, and insects; and that they frequently are able to respond successfully when circumstances of weather or food availability change over the course of the winter. In an email exchange posted by Ben Cacace to the news group 'eBirds NYC,' Sargent provided examples where banded Rufous and Calliope Hummingbirds returned year after year to wintering sites in the Southeast that were at least as cold as coastal NY (lowest temperatures -10 to 10 degrees F), and other examples where banded birds that 'disappeared' during periods of poor weather or food availability were proven to reappear at their original sites when conditions ameliorated—or at new sites hundreds of miles away.

We do not pretend here to be able to resolve all of the ethical issues outlined above, but it seems clear in view of current knowledge that the occurrence of hummingbirds in eastern North America during late fall and winter is not necessarily an 'unnatural' phenomenon, even when the birds use feeders as one source of food. Nor does the presence of hummingbirds during sub-freezing weather automatically require relocating the birds or taking them into captivity. After all, Calliopes breeding in Montana routinely lay their eggs and begin incubating while snow remains on the ground and nighttime temperatures drop below freezing (R. Sargent, in litt.). Whatever one's views on these matters, vagrant hummingbirds will undoubtedly continue to challenge both our identification skills and our sentiments. We encourage observers in NY and elsewhere to embrace these challenges as we strive to understand the present and future distributional trends of these enigmatic birds.

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