

Status and Occurrence of Ruby-throated Hummingbird (*Archilochus colubris*) in British Columbia.
By Rick Toochin and Don Cecile.

Introduction and Distribution

The Ruby-throated Hummingbird (*Archilochus colubris*) is found as a breeding species in Canada from central Alberta, central Saskatchewan, southern Manitoba, southern Ontario, southern Quebec, New Brunswick, Prince Edward Island, and Nova Scotia, but is a casual species in Newfoundland and Labrador (Dunn and Alderfer 2011). In the United States, the Ruby-throated Hummingbird is found as a breeding species from extreme northeastern Montana, extreme north-central and northeastern North Dakota, south through the eastern Great Plains to eastern and extreme southern Texas, the Gulf Coast, and central Florida (with birds rarely breeding in southern Florida) (Weidensaul *et al.* 2013).

The Ruby-throated Hummingbird winters in Mexico (from sea level to 3,000 m) from southern Sinaloa on the Pacific slope, Oaxaca in the interior, and southern Veracruz on the Atlantic slope, south through the Yucatán Peninsula (including Cozumel and Holbox Island), Belize, Honduras (from sea level to 1,500 m), Guatemala, El Salvador (from sea level to 1,066 m), and Nicaragua to the Pacific slope of Costa Rica and occasionally to extreme western Panama, but is absent on the eastern Atlantic slope of Honduras and Nicaragua (Weidensaul *et al.* 2013).

In Costa Rica, the Ruby-throated Hummingbird is uncommon to locally common in lowlands and foothills of the north Pacific slope, becoming more uncommon southward; they are very rare on the north Pacific slope of western Panama (Weidensaul *et al.* 2013) .

In North America, the Ruby-throated Hummingbird is a very rare visitor in the winter in northern Florida and the Carolinas (Williams 1929, Hauser and Currie 1966); and this species remains a rare, but regular winter resident in Florida from the central peninsula south through the Florida Keys (Robertson and Woolfenden 1992). The Ruby-throated Hummingbird is an increasingly common winter resident along the Gulf Coast, especially west of Tallahassee, Florida (Weidensaul *et al.* 2013). It has been discovered that this species is more common than once thought due to recent winter hummingbird banding projects in southern Alabama and northern Florida (Weidensaul *et al.* 2013). There has been a sharp increase in wintering Ruby-throated Hummingbirds along the Gulf Coast of Louisiana in recent years, and it is unclear if these birds are year round residents or birds that migrate to the northern regions of the species breeding range (Weidensaul *et al.* 2013).

Along the west coast of North America, the Ruby-throated Hummingbird is an accidentally occurring species. In California, there are 7 records of the Ruby-throated Hummingbird that

have been accepted by the California Bird Records Committee (Hamilton *et al.* 2007). In Oregon, the Ruby-throated Hummingbird has only 2 accepted records by the Oregon Bird Records Committee (OFO 2012). In Washington State, there has only been 1 accepted record of the Ruby-throated Hummingbird by the Washington Bird Records Committee (Wahl *et al.* 2005, WBRC 2012). In Idaho, there are only 4 accepted records of the Ruby-throated Hummingbird by the Idaho Bird Records Committee (IBRC 2015), and there is only 1 accepted record for Alaska (West 2008). In British Columbia, the Ruby-throated Hummingbird is a rare to annually occurring species that probably breeds in the Peace River region (Toochin *et al.* 2014a, see Table 1). In the rest of the Province, the Ruby-throated Hummingbird is an accidentally occurring species with records scattered from many parts of British Columbia (Toochin *et al.* 2014a, see Table 1).

Identification and Similar Species

The identification of the Ruby-throated Hummingbird is covered in all standard field guides. Adult males can be safely identified with good views and angles. The females and immatures are tricky to distinguish from the similar Black-chinned Hummingbird (*Archilochus alexandri*) without very close up views and possibly full frame photographs (Howell 2003). The Ruby-throated Hummingbird is a small hummingbird measuring 10 cm in length (Dunn and Alderfer 2011).

The adult male has a brilliant red gorget when fully illuminated, but will look dark unless seen in perfect light (Howell 2003). The chin is black which extends up as a line from the base of the bill through behind the eye (Howell 2001). The crown is green and extends down the nape and neck (Dunn and Alderfer 2011). The bill is short, fairly straight and black (Howell 2003). The eyes are dark with a small white spot behind them (Sibley 2000). The chest is white with a green vest on the sides and green spots on the undertail coverts (Howell 2001). The back is green and extends down to the rump (Howell 2001). The tail is dark and forked-shaped (Dunn and Alderfer 2011). The folded wings are dark and extend down towards the tail tip (Howell 2003). The wing tips are narrow, pointed and straight (Howell 2003). The adult female is bright green from forecrown, on the top of the head, down the neck and down the back to the rump onto the base of the tail (Howell 2003). The inner tail feathers are green with large black feathers with oval white feather tips (Howell 2001). The bill is like the male's, black, short and fairly straight (Dunn and Alderfer 2011). There is a thin dark line from the eye to the bill with a small white spot behind the dark eye (Howell 2001). The wings are dark and have the same pointed narrow shape when folded as the adult male (Howell 2003). Of note, some 5-to-6 year old females develop 5–6 red feathers on the throat (Weidensaul *et al.* 2013). In flight, wings emit a humming sound, higher and more variably pitched than in the male (Weidensaul *et al.* 2013).

Immature birds look similar to adult females (Weidensaul *et al.* 2013). Many immatures have a gleaming white throat and pale breast with grayish sides and flanks (Weidensaul *et al.* 2013). The immature male usually has dusky streaks on the throat in addition to a few metallic red feathers (Weidensaul *et al.* 2013).

The call notes are a soft “chew” that is almost identical to the calls of the Black-chinned Hummingbird (Sibley 2000).

The adult male Black-chinned Hummingbird has a black chin that also extends up from the base of the bill through the eye (Howell 2003). The gorget is purple when perfectly illuminated, but will look dark unless seen in perfect light (Howell 2001). This species has a slightly longer bill to that of the Ruby-throated Hummingbird (Howell 2003). The folded wings project close to the tail, but the wing tips are broad and the wing is curved (Howell 2001). In all other ages, it looks very similar to the Ruby-throated Hummingbird (Howell 2001). Good views of the folded wing are essential for distinguishing them from the similar Ruby-throated Hummingbird (Howell 2001).

For an in-depth discussion on the identification differences between the Ruby-throated Hummingbird and the Black-chinned Hummingbird, as well as other species, it is recommended to read Howell (2003).

Occurrence and Documentation

In British Columbia, the Ruby-throated Hummingbird has an interesting story. While being an absolute rarity almost everywhere in the Province, in the Peace River this species is expanding from nearby Alberta (Weidensaul *et al.* 2013). There are at least 17 records for the Peace River, including male and female bird’s together, possible breeding behaviour, and young birds (Toochin *et al.* 2014, see Table 1). It is only a matter of time before a nest will be confirmed in the region (Weidensaul *et al.* 2013). In the rest of the Province, there are records of the Ruby-throated Hummingbird from various areas around British Columbia. There are 3 records for the Vancouver area, 1 recent record for the Fraser Valley, 3 for Vancouver Island, and 2 records for the Cariboo (Toochin *et al.* 2014a, see Table 1). There can be difficulties in identification and separating Ruby-throated Hummingbird from other species such as the closely related Black-chinned Hummingbird. This factor makes it likely that female and immature birds go largely undetected by most observers, or are misidentified (Howell 2003). There is also the problem of hybrid birds that can sometimes look superficially similar to pure birds (Weidensaul *et al.* 2013). A male hummingbird, identified as a possible Ruby-throated Hummingbird was photographed at Johnson’s Landing from May 8-11, 2014 (G. Spitler Pers. Comm.). Subsequent research found

this bird to be a hybrid Ruby-throated x Calliope Hummingbird (S. Williamson Pers. Comm.). Hybridization amongst the different hummingbird species has been found to be far more common than was previously thought in the past (S. Williamson Pers. Comm.). With any rarity, it is always encouraged that the observer tries to get photographs because this will not only properly document the sighting, but also to make sure that the hummingbird in question is not a hybrid (S. Williamson Pers. Comm.). To date, outside the Peace River region, almost all records are of adult males (Toochin *et al.* 2014a, see Table 1). The Provincial records show a clear pattern of vagrancy from April to June with 21 records (Toochin *et al.* 2014a, see Table 1). The rest of the Provincial records come from the month of August (Toochin *et al.* 2014a, see Table 1). As more people enjoy and watch hummingbirds, especially at feeders, it is very likely that future Ruby-throated Hummingbirds will be found outside the Peace River region.



Figures 1, 2, 3 & 4: Record #15: Ruby-throated Hummingbird adult male in New Hazelton on August 8, 2007. Photos © Kim Trombley.



Figure 4: Record #26: Ruby-throated Hummingbird adult male Johnson Road, Taylor, Peace River on June 14, 2015. Photo © Peter Candido.



Figure 5: Record #26: Ruby-throated Hummingbird adult female Johnson Road, Taylor, Peace River on June 14, 2015. Photo © Peter Candido.



Figures 5, 6 & 7: Comparison shots of an adult male Black-chinned Hummingbird adult male at the Hope Airport on May 17, 2014. Note large rounded wing tips in right photo. Photos © Rick Toochin.

Table 1: Records of Ruby-throated Hummingbird for British Columbia:

- 1.(1) adult male June 11-21, 1951: Guiget: near Vanderhoof (Guignet 1952, Campbell *et al.* 1990b)
- 2.(1) adult male May 4-6 & June 1-11, 1977: Howard Telosky (RBCM Photo 626) Stories Beach, s. of Campbell River (Telosky 1977, Campbell *et al.* 1990b)
- 3.(1) adult male late May, 1978: Howard Telosky: Stories Beach, south of Campbell River (Mattocks and Hunn 1978b, Campbell *et al.* 1990b)
- 4.(1) adult male April 28, 1979: Allen Poynter: North Vancouver (Campbell *et al.* 1990b)
- 5.(1) adult male July 21, 1981: Brian M. Kautesk: Yew Lake Trail, Cypress Bowl Provincial Park, West Vancouver (Weber 1982, Campbell *et al.* 1990b)
- 6.(1) adult male June 12, 1983: Chris Siddle: near Tupper (Campbell 1983c, Campbell *et al.* 1990b)
- 7.(1) adult male April 1-2, 1992: Shirley Dorsey, mobs: Campbell Valley Regional Park, Langley (Dorsey 1996b, Toochin *et al.* 2014c)

- 8.(1) adult male May 23, 1998: Tony Greenfield, Doug Brown: Gutah Camp, Sikanni Chief River, near Ft. Nelson (Toochin *et al.* 2014a)
- 9.(1-2) adults male & female June-July, 2000: Len & Molly Donaldson near Valley View, just south of the Kiskatinaw River (Toochin *et al.* 2014a)
- 10.(1-2) adults male & female June-July, 2001: Len & Molly Donaldson near Valley View, just south of the Kiskatinaw River (Toochin *et al.* 2014a)
 - (1) adult female June 29, 2001: Mike Toochin, mobs: near Valley View, just south of the Kiskatinaw River (Toochin *et al.* 2014a)
- 11.(1) female August 16, 2002: Mark Phinney: near Dawson Creek (Toochin *et al.* 2014a)
- 12.(1) adult male June 5 - July 5, 2003: John Bergh, Martina Frey, Jukka Jantunen, mobs: near Taylor, Peace River (Toochin *et al.* 2014a)
- 13.(4-4) adult 4 male/ 4 females May 20-June 28, 2004: John Bergh, mobs: near Taylor, Peace River (Toochin *et al.* 2014a)
- 14.(1) adult male June 12-16, 2005: Mike Bentley (photo) 9 km down Johnson Road near Taylor, Peace River (Toochin *et al.* 2014a)
- 15.(1) adult male August 6-9, 2007: Ray Sturney, Maureen Sargeant (photo) New Hazelton (Sturney 2007)
- 16.(1) adult female August 26-29, 2008: Martin Dollenkamp (photo) Black Creek, near Campbell River (Toochin *et al.* 2014b)
- 17.(1) adult May 31, 2009: Aaron Marshall: Diamond Willow Road, Dawson Creek (Toochin *et al.* 2014a)
- 18.(1) adult female June 8, 2009: Russ Cannings: Taylor Flats Sub Road (Toochin *et al.* 2014a)
- 19.(1) adult June 22, 2009: Ilya Povalyaev: Taylor Flats Sub Road (Toochin *et al.* 2014a)
- 20.(1-2) adult female & possible male June 30, 2010: Russ Cannings: Taylor Flats Sub Road (Toochin *et al.* 2014a)
- 21.(1) adult female June 12, 2011: Russ Cannings: Taylor Flats Sub Road (Toochin *et al.* 2014a)
- 22.(1) adult male July 8, 2011: Doug Brown (photo) 43 km up the Komie Road, North of Ft. Nelson (Toochin *et al.* 2014a)
- 23.(1) adult male May 31-July 17, 2013: Chris Di Corrado, mobs: west end of Johnson Road, outside Taylor (Toochin *et al.* 2014a)
- 24.(1) adult male May 20, 2014: Rick Toochin: Hope (R. Toochin Pers. Comm.)
- 25.(1) adult male May 21-31, 2014: Eve Pye: Ft. St. John (J. Fenneman Pers. Comm.)
- 26.(1) adult male June 18, 2014: Evan Pye: Braden Road, south of Taylor (J. Fenneman Pers. Comm.)
- 27.(1) adult male June 14, 2015: Peter Candido (photo) Johnson Road, Taylor, Peace River (P. Candido Pers. Comm.)

Acknowledgements

We wish to thank Kim Trombley for her photographs of a male Ruby-throated Hummingbird from New Hazelton. We also wish to Gail Spitler for details on the hybrid hummingbird at Johnson's Landing and Sherri Williamson for providing details on why the bird was a hybrid. We also want to thank Peter Candido for providing both photographs and information on his recent Ruby-throated Hummingbird sightings from the Peace River. All photos are used with permission of the photographer and are fully protected by copyright law.

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