

Naturewise  
Hummingbirds  
8-13-98

In a recent conversation with Luke and Shirley Austin an interest was shown in hummingbirds which suggested the subject for this week's column.

Of the thirteen known species of hummingbirds that nest in the U.S., only the Ruby-throated Hummingbird nests regularly east of the Mississippi River. They are common in Pickett County but the nests are very difficult to find. In our thirty five years of birding we have been lucky enough to find only one and that was in Arizona. They are built by the female alone of very fine fibers, attached to a small limb with spider silk and covered outside with grayish lichens. The finished nest looks like a knot on the limb. The male Ruby-throat, which has a metallic green back and a bright ruby colored throat, has nothing to do with nest building or rearing of the young. He mates [is suspected of polygamy], then goes his merry way, leaving the female to do the chores. She lays two white, bean sized eggs in the nest and has been known to start a second nest while still feeding young.

During the first part of August you may see more hummers with white bellies and green backs coming to your feeders than the more familiar male with the red throat. These are the immatures and females. All are storing body fat to be used later in the fall migration flight across the Gulf of Mexico to Central America where they will spend the winter.

Hummingbirds seem to be cantankerous around a feeder, sometimes tangling in a fight that ends on the ground. This is a survival instinct to protect a food supply by chasing off all others. I have avoided having one feeder being dominated by one bird by hanging six feeders approximately six feet apart, all on the same side of the house, and have had up to twenty hummers in sight at one time. However this doesn't always work when there are only a few hummingbirds around. Leave feeders up in the fall and winter as long as you like, it will not affect the migrating time of the birds.

At this time of the year there is a possibility of a western hummingbird wandering into our area, so if you see one that doesn't look like a Ruby-throat, please call us at 864-3236. You just might have a good one.

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