

What Came to Our Hummingbird Feeder

When we set out our hummingbird feeder this spring, we expected our old friends, the Ruby-throated Hummingbirds. We were not disappointed in their visits.

One hummingbird flew in and squeaked around the back yard and the feeder on April 19th. The male showed up first to take over his territory and was followed by the female. We did not see lots of activity at our feeder in the late spring and early summer, probably due to the availability of small flying insects, which pack more protein per pond than sugared water does. Flowers are also beginning to be more plentiful during this time.



Female Ruby-throated Hummingbird

exquisite little cup made of soft plant down and woven together with spider web to make it strong. They prefer deciduous trees and place the nest on a horizontal branch. It takes her a little over a week to create the nest. She then lays her eggs, which take about two weeks to hatch.

She broods the naked young almost continually at first. She does all the feeding alone. And she has her own, very high, metabolism to nurture at the same time. She will eat insects and insect eggs found in crevices of tree bark and then regurgitate this food down her youngsters' throats. The young fledge about 19 days later.

This often gets us to the middle of July, when we usually begin seeing more activity at our feeder.

This year we were in for a surprise. A partially leucistic Ruby-throated Hummingbird showed up at our feeder.



PHOTO: PETE GILMORE

Male Ruby-throated Hummingbird

Leucism is the presence of white feathers in a bird that normally does not have white feathers. Melanism is the presence of black feathers, similarly. Both conditions are due to genetic mutations that are somewhat rare. You occasionally see crows with some white feathers. The little leucistic hummingbird came and went at our feeder. I managed a shot of it through a window screen, but

you can see the white feathering clearly.

The leucistic bird alternated with a male and at least one female-looking hummingbird at our feeder. I write alternated because hummingbirds are amazingly aggressive around feeders, chasing each other with what looks to us like ferocious speed. It may be second gear to them. The young hummingbirds are very similar to the female plumage, so it is hard to tell the mother from the offspring.

Now the interest level was up, and we were watching the feeder more often. Surprises were not over. One day, out of the blue, a beautiful

golden-orange male Baltimore Oriole appeared, slowly slipping down the stem of the feeder, and drinking the sugared water meant for the hummingbirds. The hummingbirds tolerated the oriole just fine. If they were possessive, the oriole would be no match for them. This Baltimore Oriole was leading his small flock of fledglings around, teaching them to find food. The young birds did not emulate his hummingbird feeder antics, however. So far, this oriole has returned over the period of a week, sipping from the hummingbird feeder.



PHOTO: PETE GILMORE

Leucistic Ruby-throated Hummingbird



PHOTO: PETE GILMORE

Male Baltimore Oriole

Soon, all of these characters will head south. The Ruby-throated Hummingbirds winter in Central America, and the Baltimore Orioles winter in southern Central America and northern South America. A percentage of

the hummingbirds actually fly across the Gulf of Mexico, whereas the orioles go overland through Mexico. If a storm catches hummingbirds over the Gulf of Mexico, they do not survive.

Both species add wonderful color and interest to our lives. They are in Newton from May through September each year. It can add quality to your life if you can feed these flashes of brilliance while they are with us. ■

—Pete Gilmore

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Fritillary

Photo by Suzette Barbier

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The Newton Conservators promotes the protection and preservation of natural areas, including parks, playgrounds, forests and streams, which are open or may be converted to open space for the enjoyment and benefit of the people of Newton. It further aims to disseminate information about these and other environmental matters.

A primary goal is to foster the acquisition of land, buildings and other facilities to be used for the encouragement of scientific, educational, recreational, literary and other public pursuits that will promote good citizenship and the general welfare of the people of our community.

The Newton Conservators was formed as a not-for-profit organization 54 years ago in June 1961.

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We welcome material related to our mission from any source. Send proposed articles or letters by email in MS Word or rich text format to bethwilkinson@mac.com. Digitized photographs, maps and diagrams are also welcome.

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