

Battles at the Feeder

By Larry Hyslop



Photo of a Black-chin Hummingbird by Ed Nickel

What would we do without the daily hummingbird battles? These tiny figures darting through the yard, trying to murder each other and keep the sugar water all to themselves.

We currently have six hummingbirds of two species fighting it out in the back yard. The Black-chin Hummingbirds have been here all summer. They show mostly green bodies and the male has black beneath its chin. The bottom edge of this black is an iridescent purple. The Rufous female has a green back but brown belly. The male shows brown back and belly along with red beneath the chin. The Rufous nest farther north, and in May they came through on their northern migration and are now returning south.

One of our sugar water feeders has six feeding ports so all six hummingbirds could calmly drink at the same time, but that would not be any fun. Instead, a hierarchy is in place. I believe the male of the more aggressive Rufous is top dog, or bird. Next comes the Black-chin male, followed by the female Rufous and the Black-chin female. Apparently, my status lies somewhere below all of these, merely being the creature that hangs up the sugar water.

I understood my place in the flock when I last filled a feeder. I had barely placed it on its hook, with my hand still on the feeder, when a number of high speed chases took place between the feeder and my face. The male Rufous was too busy trying to keep all other birds from its feeder, to pay attention to me.

My ability as the filler also seems to be in question. After filling a feeder, I set it on the deck table to allow the hot water to cool before I hung it up. I did not want to scald the hummingbirds after all. I looked out the window a minute later to find two hummingbirds feeding from it with the feeder on the table.

All of Elko's feeders are important for hummingbirds. They need that quick energy they get from the sugar water. What is not used in battles is converted to fat and burned for heat during the night. They usually drink flower nectar for this energy but this late in a dry summer would probably mean fewer surviving hummingbirds.

My technique is to heat about 1-1/2 cups of water in the microwave and then pour in a huge amount of sugar. I know it has enough sugar when the water discolors slightly. Remember, the house on the block with the strongest sugar mix gets the most hummingbirds and yes, it is all about competition.

I do not add red food coloring since the only red they might be attracted to is around the feeder port. Besides, these birds know feeders and no doubt recognize one easily as they cruise past our houses.

All animals need protein and hummingbirds are no exception. They are voracious hunters, picking off small insects, especially spiders, from trees and plants. They have also been observed feeding on the sap that fills holes drilled into tree bark by sapsuckers, including the small insects trapped in the sap.

I plan to enjoy the epic battles while I can, since it will not be that long before they all head south for winter and I am stuck with a yard full of house sparrows. Let me know of your experiences with hummingbirds this summer, at hyslop.nv@gmail.com.

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