

Return of the hummingbirds



Tips from the Posse

By Mark Rackay

I was heading out to the patio to fire up the grill. Several steaks were about to meet their final destination in the form of our dinner. As soon as I hit the patio, a squadron of miniature fighter aircraft did a fly-by, uncomfortably close to my head.

The squadron flying the sortie were on a reconnaissance mission to let me know their feeder was empty. In an attempt to avoid further conflict, I brought the empty feeder into the house for my wife to provide a quick refill. After delivery of a full bottle, the angry birds commenced to drinking the sugar water, and all was, once again, right with the world.

The squadron consists of a half dozen hummingbirds, of unknown identification, that maintain a summer home in our backyard. These birds are all about three and a half inches long, and tip the scales at three grams, even with a diet of straight sugar water. They buzz around the yard like insane, hyperactive, Kamikaze pilots, looking for something to destroy. When the feeder is empty, they become openly hostile and on the verge of complete social unrest.

My wife places several feeders around the yard, which contain sugar water, for the hummingbirds



You can't imagine how difficult it is to get a hummingbird to sit still long enough for a picture. (Photo/Mark Rackay)

dining pleasure. The birds will put on a show for any who have the time to watch, for hours on end. Everything from quiet feeding to territorial disputes will be seen, as long as the feeder is full.

Colorado has 11 different species of hummingbirds, but only four are the most commonly seen. Those four include the Broad-tailed, Black-chinned, Calliope and the Rufous.

These miniature dive-bombers are capable of reaching speeds exceeding 50 mph as their wings beat up to 90 times per second, during normal flight. During courtship, the wings can flap 200 times per second. They can even fly backwards and upside down.

Their bills and tongues have evolved so they can reach deep into flowers for nectar. The hummingbird tongue can flick into the nectar at 20 times per second. A hummingbird consumes twice its body weight in a normal day, visiting up to 1000 flowers to do so, unless there is a free feeder around. These birds need to refuel every

10 minutes and burn up to 12,000 calories a day. At that caloric rate, you can see why they are so hyperactive. Imagine giving your kid 12,000 calories of Halloween candy at one sitting.

Relative to their body size, the hummingbird has the fastest heartbeat in the animal kingdom, topping out at over 1200 beats per minute, and breath about 150 times a minute. They stay in motion almost constantly, in order to stay alive. Sort of explains the diet of nectar and sugar. Even with the overactive cardio-pulmonary system, they still live about three years in the wild.

The hummingbirds build a very small nest, usually made from spider webs, tiny pieces of lichen and tree bark. The nest starts in a cup shape, but stretches as the chicks grow until the cup is flattened into a platform shape.

The only hummingbirds to breed in Colorado are the Black-tailed and the Black-chinned, and they will have two broods a year, with up to two eggs

in each. The eggs are about the size of a coffee bean, and the babies when hatched, are around a quarter of an inch long and completely featherless.

For my money, the most aggressive species of the more than 350 worldwide, is the Rufous hummingbird. These little bullies are the most entertaining to have around your feeders. They are the reason you should have several feeders around your yard or campsite, lest you have social unrest from multiple birds on the same feeder.

Rufous are very solitary species and become very defensive and aggressive around feeders. This bird will perch on high branches, above the feeder, "keeping guard" on "their" feeder. When an intruder, be it human or another bird, comes near "their" feeder, Rufous will chase, chirp and threaten by dive-bombing, tail fanning and generally raising a vocal discontent until you move away. It is a good thing these little birds do not reach several pounds in size, or they could really injure someone.

The Rufous will join us in Colorado during mid-summer. The migration of the Rufous is thought to be the longest of any bird in the world in relation to its size. The spring migration for the Rufous takes them up the Pacific coast where the birds breed in the Northwest, British Columbia and Alaska. This is the furthest north that any hummingbird species breeds.

Rufous' southbound migration will start in June, bringing them down the Rockies where they slowly work their way back to their winter territory in Mexico and Guatemala. This migration covers an estimated 3900 miles, which is amazing for such a little bird.

If you are going to feed these little birds, please refrain from using any dyes, or buying premade feed with red dye in it. The dye can make them sick and even be deadly. Just plain, clear feed mix is all that is needed.

Mix four cups of water with one cup of white table sugar. Stir until dissolved and bring to a brief

boil. Let it cool and fill the feeder. The extra can be stored in the refrigerator for up to a week.

There are many feeders available to choose from. I prefer the ones that are easy to clean and refill, because you will spend much time filling them once the birds' home in on it. The feeder will need to be cleaned at least weekly, and sometimes more often during hot weather, using a vinegar-water solution. Be careful to not allow any mold in your feeder, as mold is toxic to hummingbirds. Getting several feeders provides the best entertainment.

We put up our feeders in May, as soon as freezing temperatures are gone. You can leave them up well into October, as the hearty Rufous can stand colder temperatures than other species and might still be around.

We keep spare jug of premade feed in the refrigerator during the summer months, so an empty feeder can be refilled immediately. We don't need any rioting or civil uprising among the local hummingbirds when one is empty.

Mark Rackay is a columnist for the Montrose Daily Press, Delta County Independent, and several other newspapers, as well as a feature writer for The Nautical Mile, and several other saltwater fishing magazines. He is an avid hunter and world class saltwater angler, who travels around the world in search of adventure and serves as a Director and Public Information Officer for the Montrose County Sheriff's Posse. Personal email is elkhunter77@icloud.com For information about the Posse call 970-765-7033 (leave a message) or email info@mcspi.org

Slovenia — a global leader in environmental conservation

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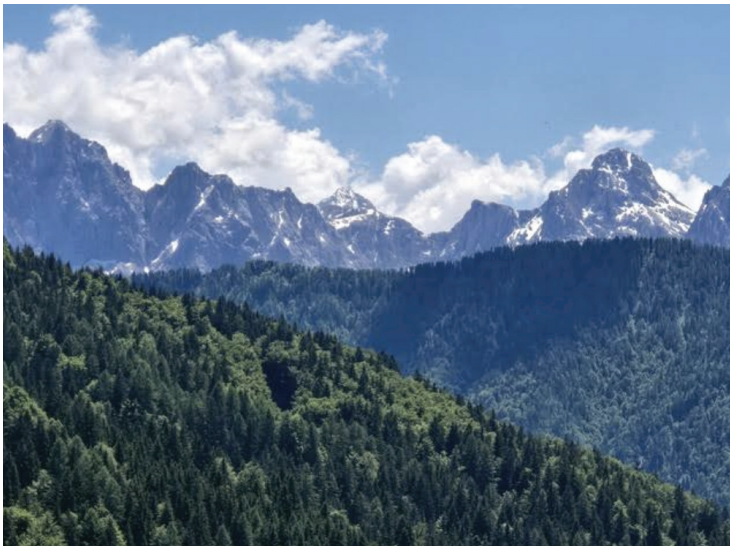
Who would guess that a very small central European country roughly the size of New Jersey would be the global lead in conservation! Slovenia, renown for stunning natural landscapes is an ecologically diverse country demonstrating a profound commitment to conservation. It's an incredibly picturesque country with mountains, dense forests, and a rich array of biodiversity, that has historically influenced



Thursday July 9, 7:00 -8:30 pm Black Canyon Audubon Society will host Emily Schneider and Tom Wiard presenting "Circling Triglav National Park, Slovenia. This country is a global leader in conservation prioritizing biodiversity through strict management of forests, water resources and wildlife aiming for sustainable "green" tourism. Get a glimpse of the people, terrain and birdlife of this unique country. The meeting location has changed to Baldrige Hall, Montrose United Methodist Church, 647 South 1st Street. For more information about the speaker and topic go to programs at blackcanyonaudubon.org

values that have been cultivated over generations.

The country boasts an impressive network of protected areas, including national parks, nature reserves, and landscape parks. In total, Slovenia has over 40 protected areas, over 53% of its country, highlighting its commitment to environmental conservation and sustainable development. Among the most recognized of these areas is Triglav National Park, the only national park in



Slovenia, renown for stunning natural landscapes is an ecologically diverse country demonstrating a profound commitment to conservation. (Courtesy photo)

Slovenia, covering over 880 square kilometers of pristine alpine landscapes. Tom Wiard and Emily Schneider spent three weeks in this National Park enjoying the people, landscapes and birdlife. Black Canyon Audubon Society will host Emily and Tom as they present their travel experience, interactions with the local Slovenians, insights into the country's conservation ethos, "green" tourism

as well as the incredible wildlife diversity of this national park. The Black Canyon Audubon Society is pleased to bring you this slice of a country on the cutting edge of global conservation. Please join us on July 9, 7:00 pm at (new location) Baldrige Hall, Montrose Methodist Church, 647 South 1st Street. For more information about the speakers and topic go to programs at blackcanyonaudubon.org

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