# HUMMINGBIRDS IN MADERA
## Part I

By Bob Pitcher

In the November issue of the Chatter, I wrote here about some of my favorite birds common in Madera Canyon. Alert readers will have noticed that I left out a major group of birds that must be near the top of just about anybody's favorites in Madera: the hummingbirds.

After all, the Canyon is among the very best places in North America to see a large variety of hummingbirds. Seventeen species of hummingbird are seen regularly in the United States; sixteen of them have been reported from the Canyon, and more than half of those breed here.

And yes, hummingbirds as a group are indeed favorites of mine. But I find I don't really think about them as I think of birds in other families. Hummingbirds are just too different – in appearance, in actions, and in how I respond to them.

Compared to other birds, hummingbirds are so little, more comparable to insects than to most other birds. Nor are they shaped like others: needle bills, narrow wings, perfectly streamlined. No other species looks like a hummingbird, at least not on this continent – yet hummingbirds all closely resemble one another.

Many male hummingbirds and a few females also sport – surely the right word here! – patches of iridescent plumage on throat, crown, and back and breast as well. Other birds, notably many kinds of waterfowl, also show iridescence, but hummingbirds flaunt theirs, clearly knowing just how to turn in the sunlight to show off to best advantage.

Birds other than hummingbirds can and do hover, but none can hover with such lack of effort, and none can fly backward, as hummingbirds readily do. These abilities allow hummingbirds access to the flowers they frequent both for nectar and for small spiders and insects. Many flowers depend primarily on hummingbirds for pollination, and different hummingbird species are adapted, through bill length and shape, to different shapes of bloom. This variation is more apparent among the hundreds of South and Central American species than it is among the relatively few North American types.

Common to all, apparently, is the fast direct flight of hummingbirds from one target to another – so fast indeed that their flight is very hard to follow with the eye. Much else could be said about the various unique aspects of hummingbird behavior and physiognomy – their astonishingly high metabolism, the males' acrobatic courting, various species' lengthy migrations, and so on.

Here, I'll emphasize what is to me a trait hummingbirds share with practically no other bird: the bold curiosity of many of them about people. Hummingbirds evidently want to know what sort of creatures we are and are quite fearless about inquiring. I assume they know, as other very small birds seem to, that animals as big as people, even if predatory, aren't interested in prey as tiny as they are. Other birds, though, even those as curious about things as wrens, keep their distance from people, or else keep very close to cover. Not hummingbirds: it's not infrequent that a hummingbird, usually in my experience a male, will fly up to me, and, hovering, look me in the eye for a few seconds before going about his business.

I grew up in the East, where hummingbirds are uncommon. I initially looked askance at stories of this behavior. Now that I have a feeder on my porch in Arizona, I find it's common. I have an immense interest in birds; it's delightful to have some of that interest returned.

In Madera Canyon, the best place to see hummingbirds is the array of feeders at the Santa Rita Lodge, halfway up the road to the top. From dawn until dark, birdwatchers may be found there, sometimes a crowd of them, many with

cameras as well as their binoculars. There are often crowds of hummingbirds as well. Feeders, though fewer of them, are also out at the Madera Kubo, just above the Amphitheater, and at the Chuparosa B&B, though you'll have to walk a ways to see the latter, which has parking only for guests. And hummingbirds can be seen along every trail in the Canyon.

If you're lucky, you may find a nesting female. Of course, you're much more likely to see hummingbirds in numbers in a season other than winter. After September, most leave the Canyon for Mexico or points south, or at least move downhill until spring. But not all of them. Anna's Hummingbirds and the big Rivoli's can still be found most winter days at the Lodge feeders, with sometimes a Broad-billed Hummingbird too. Those that stay are clearly not deterred by cold or wet weather.

Here at home, I have hummingbirds at my feeder before sunrise on mornings when it's in the 20s, even in the snow. Presumably they've spent the night in torpor, but when they're active, they need steady food sources at least as much as they do when the temperature is in the 90s. For real variety in Canyon hummingbirds, though, the best times to look are from mid- or early April through September.

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