

THE TEXAS

## HUMMER

SPRING 2005

A NEWSLETTER FOR TEXAS HUMMINGBIRD ROUNDUP PARTICIPANTS

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## HUMMINGBIRD ROUNDUP 2004

The 2004 hummingbird season brought surprises, both pleasant surprises like unusually large density and diversity of birds seen during the winter months, and not so pleasant as in species that had been reliably reported for several years being notably absent in the surveys this year. The Trans-Pecos, an area where we expect high diversity and one of the areas where some of those nearby non-Texas birds would be likely to show up, had a good number of reports, though often for short periods when observers from other regions were visiting. We still need long-term observers in many of the counties of this hummingbird haven.

A new feature for Texas hummingbird enthusiasts debuted this fall with the introduction of TX-HUMMER list serve to the Texas birding/computer scene. This is a Texas-based opportunity to post information relating to hummingbirds in a forum

that will spread the word across the Lone Star state. TX-HUMMER is hosted by the UH system and is a subscription based service. To subscribe send the message "subscribe TX-HUMMER" to [listserv@listserv.uh.edu](mailto:listserv@listserv.uh.edu).

While posts have been sparse thus far, the return of hummingbirds and the coming migration season promise more posts.

In this edition of the *Hummer*, we will be exploring hummingbird havens from the perspective of available habitat for these birds. While hummingbird gardening literature usually highlights the plants needed to feed these birds, observations and the data received from the Roundup is showing that these birds are associated more with the available cover than with traditional feeding plants.

We'll also look at Texas' standing in national surveys that look at backyard feeder

birds. Cornell and Audubon run a number of surveys focused on birds, and these surveys have always included reports on hummingbirds. Where are these birds being found on Christmas Bird Counts? Are they being reported in Great Backyard Bird Count checklists? Does the data from these surveys reflect the findings in the annual Roundup reports?

Notes from survey participants are always an interesting portion of the newsletter and this year is no exception. At time of publication, the notes and data sheets were unavailable due to data entry problems. These notes will be included in a second news packet later this year.

One very interesting feature this year – a Christmas Eve snow storm that brought a foot of snow to some areas around Houston and continued south into Mexico – brought a number of

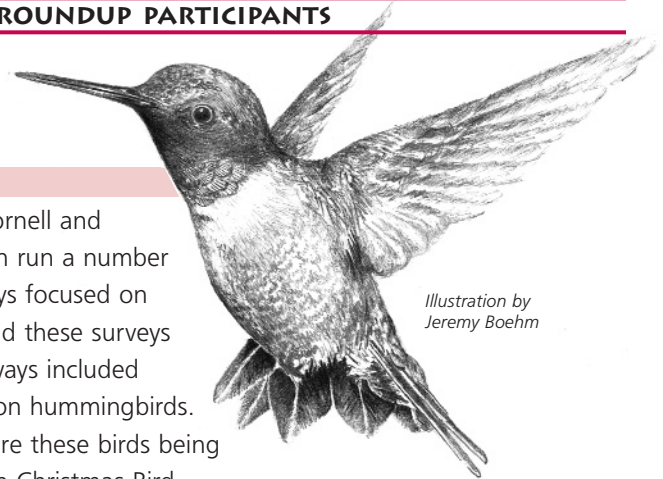


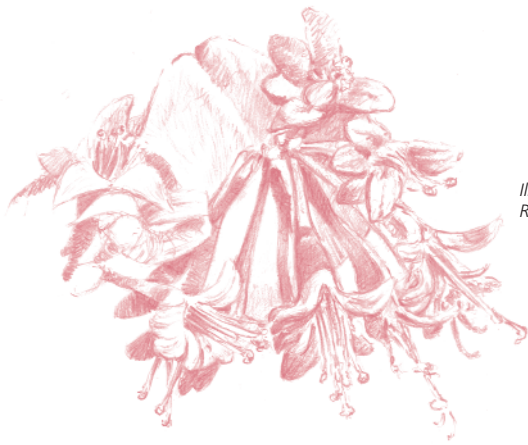
Illustration by  
Jeremy Boehm

interesting comments and observations. The birds were a prime concern of many of our observers as these storms set in and their relief after the event was palpable.

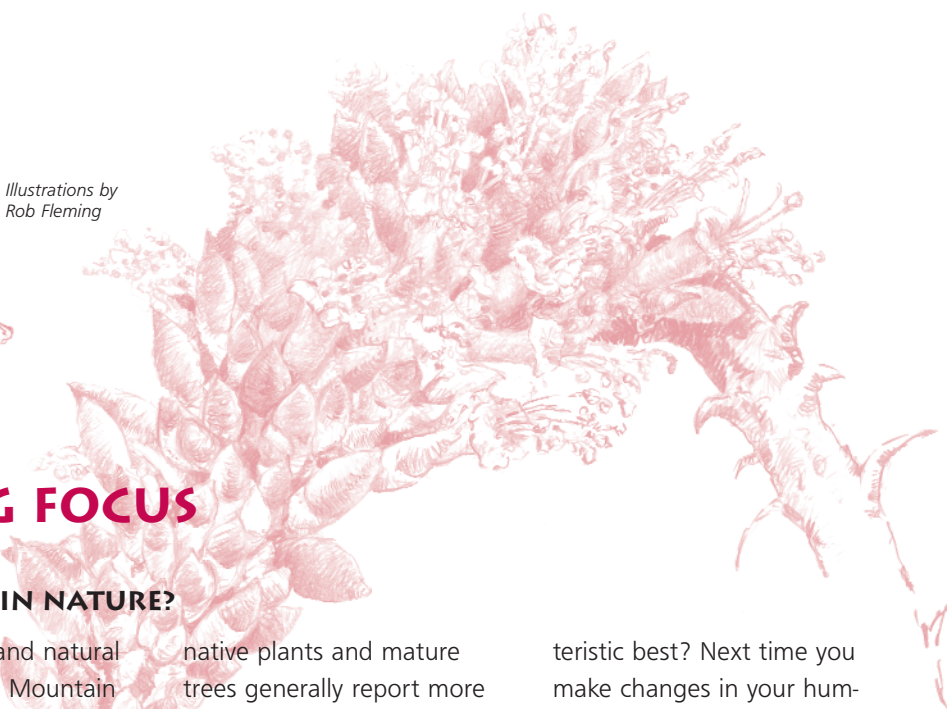
Volunteers are still needed for the 2005 roundup. Visit [www.tpwd.state.tx.us/hummingbird](http://www.tpwd.state.tx.us/hummingbird) to find the 2005 survey and pass it to a friend who also enjoys the birds. If you are traveling this year, take the survey with you and let us know what birds you see.

The wonderful wet fall promises a vibrant spring – a welcome thought for the hummingbird enthusiast! Get out your binoculars, dust off the Hummingbird Wheel and enjoy the birds.





Illustrations by Rob Fleming



## HABITAT GARDENING FOCUS

### WHERE DO WE FIND HUMMINGBIRDS IN NATURE?

The typical hummingbird gardening note is going to begin with a focus on food. Plants like Coral Honeysuckle, Trumpet Vine and Shrimp Plant\* are going to take up substantial room in these discussions. Observations, results of the Roundup, and the character of these birds tell us though that shelter, not food, is going to be a limiting factor in the density of and diversity of hummingbirds at a given site.

Hummingbirds at the Davis Mountains Hummingbird Festival – an event that hosted ten species this summer – are traditionally found in their greatest numbers and diversity at feeders associated with cover. The Limpia Canyon location – the home that everyone wants to visit during this festival – is located on the canyon wall above and within a blanket

of trees, shrubs and natural plants. The Davis Mountain Preserve banding location is adjacent to a mountain stand of pine and oak. It is often the second most diverse location at the festival. On the other hand, feeders located at the ranch seldom host much more than Black-chinned and the occasional Broad-tailed hummingbirds. Why? Could it be related to an open park-like setting? Similar situations are observed at Rockport, Lake Jackson and other hummingbird events.

Over the past six years that I have coordinated the Roundup, a number of observations have been made – probably the most eye opening in this area is the association between mature trees, native vegetation and hummingbirds. Those locations reporting a minimum 80%

native plants and mature trees generally report more hummingbirds and more diversity than those areas not meeting these characteristics.

This makes sense if we explore the hummingbirds’ natural history. Hummingbirds are, by nature montane birds that are most diverse immediately on the equator. These birds are, for the most part, associated with oak, pine, pine-fir and fir forests, riparian zones and canyons. While there are some hummingbirds associated with parklands, these birds are the exception, not the rule. Knowing this, we would naturally expect to find more diversity and greater density on properties that demonstrate an appreciation of this character in their desired guests.

So how does the hummingbird observer use this charac-

teristic best? Next time you make changes in your hummingbird garden, look at the shelter needs first. Can you develop some thick cover, both evergreen and deciduous, reasonably close to food sources? These steps should work to improve hummingbird numbers and diversity in areas where hummingbirds are present. If traveling, expect to find more hummingbirds in areas where shelter is available close to food sources. Riparian streams, forest edges and transition zones will be most productive.

Get out and enjoy the birds! Texas is hummingbird habitat.

*\*Non-native species, we do not recommend.*

# CONSERVATION BIRD SURVEYS – YOU CAN BE OF HELP

Conservation bird surveys are becoming more and more common across North America thanks in part to efforts of groups like Cornell University and the Audubon Society. These two organizations run a number of backyard and community surveys through the year and the data can be found on a combined site at [www.birdsource.org](http://www.birdsource.org). Each year Texas has made a good showing in these surveys, with the hummingbirds being quite well represented.

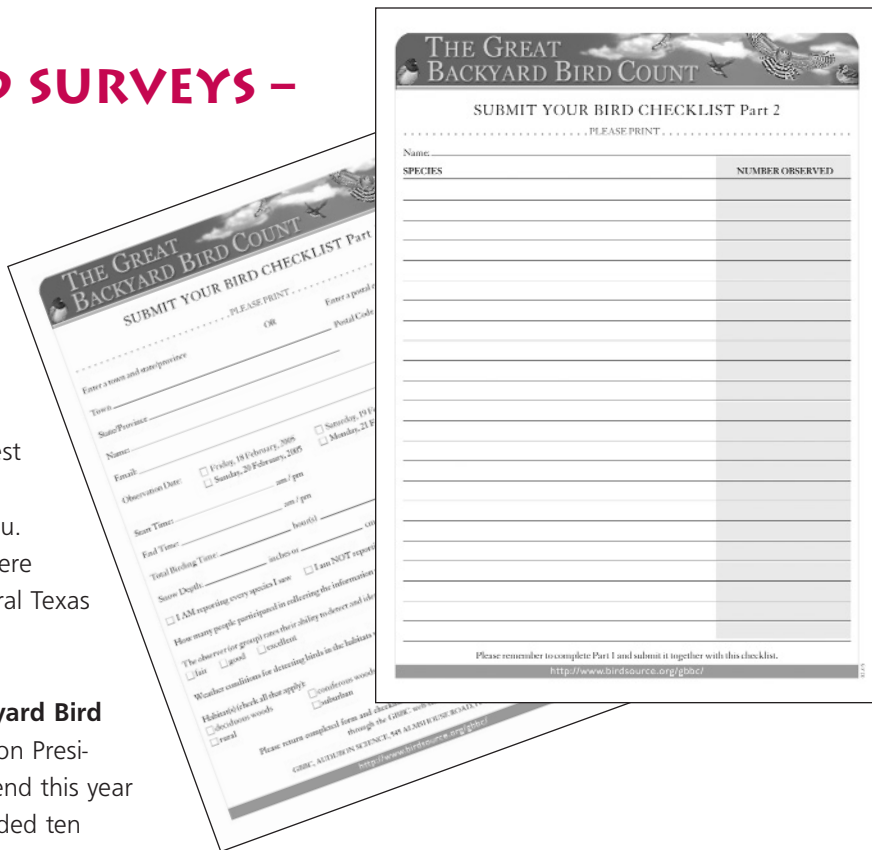
**Project Feeder Watch** is a winter-long survey of birds that visit feeders in backyards across the United States. While not limited to hummingbird species, they do track three of the common hummingbird species. This year, Texans recorded Ruby-throated hummingbirds from a scattering of feeders across the state, Black-chinned and Rufous hummingbirds from Central and Coastal Texas. The other four species that we know of during the winter in Texas were not tracked by this survey.

**Christmas Bird Counts** occur during the weeks immediately preceding and immediately following the

holiday season. In some cases, counts are actually held on New Years Day. Your local Audubon Society is your best contact for the CBC closest to you. Hummingbirds were reported on several Texas counts this year.

**The Great Backyard Bird Count** was held on President's Day weekend this year and Texans recorded ten species from across the state including a Green-breasted Mango from McAllen and a Broad-billed from Houston. Interestingly all Rufous hummingbirds recorded in Texas during this survey were from Central and Coastal Texas except one – from Fort Davis. What happened to the metroplex?

You can find out more about these surveys and their results from the link mentioned. I would urge everyone to participate in these counts, since the data helps greatly in planning and development of conservation strategies.



## IS ARIZONA CATCHING UP?

As this newsletter was being edited, news was circulating of a banded Ruby-throated in Tucson. While we do not have definite word that the bird will be accepted by the Arizona records committee, the description is very accurate and the bird is banded. Arizona has recorded three species that Texas has yet to host. Some of these have been very close to Texas borders. We, of course, still have two species that have not been recorded in Arizona.

## WHAT ABOUT THE ALLEN'S?

Banding data is showing us that this bird is not as rare as we had thought. I would still urge caution in identifying anything other than full adult males from field marks. Certainly the narrowed feathers, absence of the notch on the rectrices accompanying a full green back and red gorget are good indications of this species.

# HUMMINGBIRD IDENTIFICATION

## CALLIOPE HUMMINGBIRDS

We frequently get excited calls about a Calliope Hummingbird, only to discover that the bird was a young male Archilochus hummingbird, so differentiation of these birds is often confusing. Let's take a look at some of the differences and how we can quickly distinguish between these groups.

The Calliope Hummingbird is the smallest North American bird, a full half inch smaller than even the smallest of male Archilochus species. While even Sibley shows the Calliope as rare occurrences in Texas, they are in fact regular visitors to the Trans-Pecos region with that checklist showing them as uncommon July to September. In other regions of the state they are accidental and vagrant, but we can generally expect them to be found in

several areas across the state each year.

The area of confusion is the throat area, or gorget, of these birds. Even as a young male, the Calliope Hummingbird has the distinctive elongated feathers creating a striping effect on the gorget. As the male Archilochus develops his gorget, the colored feathers appear as tiny, distinct feathers not as stripes on the throat. If the gorget does not appear striped, it is probably not a male Calliope of any age in Texas.

A female Calliope does have a spotted throat though, but they are dark spots that are not colorful.

To distinguish the female Calliope from a young Archilochus, look at the other

Calliope traits. In addition to the small size, note the short tail, short bill, wingtips extending beyond the tip of the tail, little or no rufous in the tail and thin white line over the gape. In the male, this white line is thicker and extends from the gape to the neck.

When would you expect Calliope hummingbirds in Texas? In the Trans-Pecos, I would expect them late July through early September. Scattered occurrences the rest of the year are possible. In the rest of the state, they are possible with the migrants in late summer and fall. In no area other than the Trans-Pecos should they be an "expected bird."

Where is this bird most likely to be found? In their traditional wintering grounds –

Mexico – they are associated with "Woodland edge, open pine-oak or pine woods, wooded stream valleys thickets, brush." (Edwards, 1988\*). This describes, in general, a mountain habitat that one would expect in the Guadalupe, Franklin, Chisos and Davis Mountains of West Texas. It also describes many settings on the Edwards Plateau, in Central Texas and in East Texas. Once again, let habitat be your guide.

*\*Literature cited: Edwards, Ernest P. 1998. "The Birds of Mexico and Adjacent Areas." University of Texas Press, Austin.*

General Characteristics	Calliope	Archilochus Young
Tail	• Small bird present September–February	• Birds will be the same size as adult Ruby-throated or Black-chinned. Present June–October
Gorget	• Short, squared tail	• Forked tails longer in both species
Bill	• STRIPED or streaked rosy red	• Will be spotted with some spots more dominant than others, usually dominant to the center of the throat
Sound	• Short, thin bill	• Much longer, typical length for adult Ruby-throated or Black-chinned
	• Pale buffy	• Gray

**KEEP AN EYE  
OUT FOR THIS  
NEW BOOK!**

It's almost here! Targeted for release in August of 2005, *Hummingbirds of Texas With Their New Mexico and Arizona Ranges* was made possible in part by the information provided by hummingbird watchers associated with the Hummingbird Roundup.



# HUMMINGBIRDS IN THE SNOW

Christmas 2004 was certainly an event to remember for many of the people of South Texas as a snow storm dumped as much as 12 inches of snow in the Houston–Victoria area. While some parts of North Houston saw no snow, the Victoria area received 12 inches and the snow continued south through Corpus Christi well into the Rio Grande Valley. Harlingen had snow while the Austin area was green!

How did this affect the hummingbirds? By December 24 several homes in Houston, Rockport, Corpus Christi, the Rio Grande Valley and other areas impacted by the snow were already tracking birds that they anticipated would be overwintering birds. These homes were concerned by the cold and the impact it might have on their guests, but there was little that could be done to force the birds to move on.

So what species of hummingbirds were being watched on Christmas Eve 2004? In Houston, we had a Broad-billed Hummingbird in the northwest section of town and Rufous hummingbirds throughout the city. While the Rufous hummingbirds would certainly be familiar

with the snow, the Broad-billed Hummingbird, a review species in Texas, is a tropical bird, not one that would be expected to encounter the cold conditions expected that night as part of their normal life cycle. It is very probable that this bird had never encountered snow before and may never see it again.

Similarly, just down the coast in Victoria, and around into the Valley, Buff-bellied hummingbirds – tropical birds that would not be expected to encounter this type of weather were being observed. These birds traditionally winter on the upper coast, even being seen over into Louisiana each year, spend the nesting season on the middle to upper coast as well as in the Rio Grande Valley and Mexico.

There were also Ruby-throated and Black-chinned hummingbirds, as well as some Calliopes. And in McAllen, the Green-breasted Mango, a central Mexican Highlands species was also being seen.

So what impact did the snow have on bird diversity and numbers? While some sites, most notably a site in Victoria where hummingbirds were

being banded, reported a slight decline in the density of birds for a short period, diversity and density returned to pre-snow numbers shortly after the storms passed.

This reinforces the message that these birds can survive cold weather in Texas, something the Roundup has noted for several years. Were special precautions taken? In Brazoria County an observer put tarps over his feeders to keep the snow off and provide some shelter for the birds. In other areas, feeders were taken in overnight. These precautions allowed

the birds fresh, open feeders early in the morning after the snow, making it possible for them to receive that vital morning feeding.

We know of no one at this point who observed a Ruby-throated Hummingbird or any of the tropical birds in torpor during this period. These observations would have provided interesting data for the discussions of torpor in hummingbirds. If you observed this phenomenon, please let us know. Your experiences during the snow event would also be of interest.

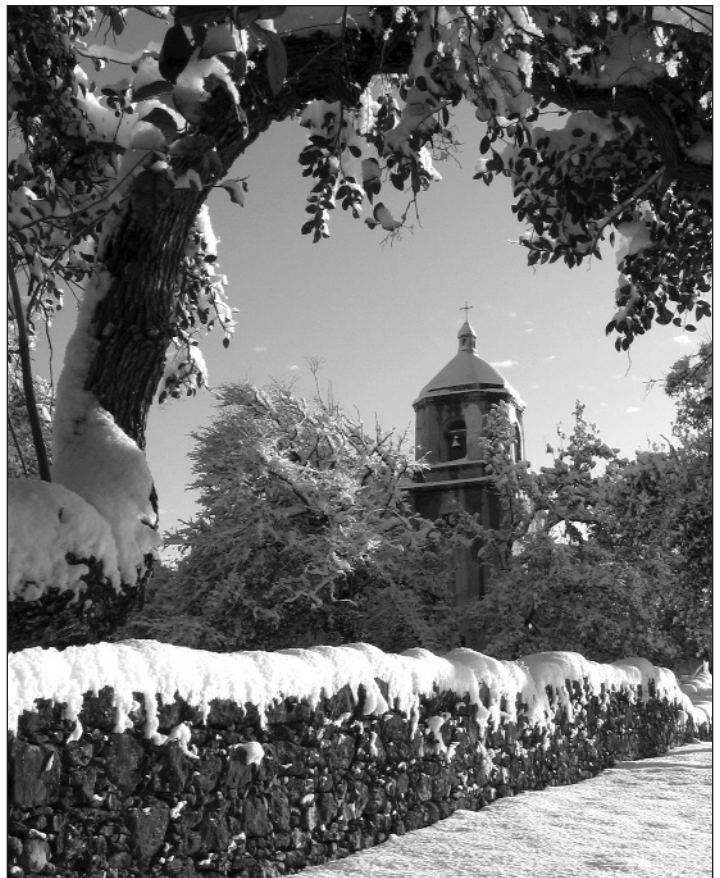


Photo by Chrissy Huth  
*Goliad State Park, December 25, 2004.*

## ARE THE NUMBERS REALLY DOWN?

The only way to really evaluate the direction a population is moving is to compare the numbers over a period of time – preferably several years – to determine a trend. Each year we have people commenting that their numbers are “the lowest they have ever been,” while at the same time others are all excited about huge numbers of hummingbirds. Many factors can influence numbers over an individual season, trend data really brings the picture into focus.

One of the best ways to observe trend data is to find a location where birds can be observed in the same place, for the same period of time, repeatedly, over the years. Just such a station exists in a six-acre banding facility in Victoria County. The site is 66% brush covered, and birds have been banded every other week between Nov. 1 and Feb. 28 for four consecutive years. In that time, Buff-bellied Hummingbird numbers have increased significantly (almost double between '01 and '05).

Black-chinned Hummingbird numbers showed a dramatic drop between '01 and '03, but we do not have significant data to establish a trend – especially when this year the numbers are higher than ever. The other big winter population is Rufous hummingbirds. While the numbers have fluctuated over the four years, they have never returned to their high count of '01-02. Interestingly, a second station in Louisiana finds a similar trend over the last two years in Rufous hummingbirds and has been able even to indi-

cate that it is the immature age group of Rufous where the greatest decline is seen.

Why is this significant to the Hummingbird Roundup participant? First, it should reassure us that not all hummingbird numbers are declining – that Louisiana station reports that numbers of Ruby-throated and Black-chinned hummingbirds seem to be up overall. Secondly, observations from surveys are often the trigger that leads a bander to do the analysis needed to observe these trends.

*Hummingbirds colliding with windows is a serious threat, especially during migration. These male Black-chinned and Ruby-throated hummingbirds were successfully rehabilitated after a collision with an Austin area office building. If birds do not respond to sugar water mixes, they should be surrendered to a bird rehabilitator.*

Photos by Chuck Kowaleski



*Wildlife rehabilitators, licensed by Texas Parks and Wildlife Department, have the knowledge and experience necessary to effectively care for injured or orphaned wildlife. If you encounter such an animal, please contact the Wildlife Diversity Program at (800) 792-1112, ext. 4481 or (512) 389-4481, and we will provide you with the name of your nearest rehabilitator.*

# HUMMINGBIRD HABITAT

Like all other animals, the hummingbirds we enjoy in our gardens actually have a traditional wildlife habitat that they are associated with. While most North American field guides offer only a cursory discussion of bird habitats, Ernest Preston Edwards in his book *The Birds of Mexico and Adjacent Areas* gives a discussion of habitat using common descriptors.

So what does this mean to hummingbird watchers? When considering possibilities for unknown birds, always keep the habitat in mind, since it can narrow your choices. When looking for a species you are unfamiliar with, remember the habitat needs. These tips should help you enjoy the hummingbirds more.



Photo by David Warren  
Female, Black-chinned Hummingbird, photographed at the Laguna Meadows camping area of Big Bend National Park.

## FOR OUR TEXAS HUMMINGBIRDS, THESE HABITAT DESCRIPTIONS INCLUDE:

<b>Green Violet-ear</b>	Moist mountain pine-oak, fir or pine forest, borders, partial clearings.
<b>Green-breasted Mango</b>	Humid open woods, partial clearings, borders, gardens.
<b>Broad-billed</b>	Gardens, brushy woods, partial clearings and thickets.
<b>White-eared</b>	Gardens, borders, pine-oak woods, mountain pine forests.
<b>Berylline</b>	Scrubby pine-oak woods, borders, overgrown clearings.
<b>Buff-bellied</b>	Scrubby woods, gardens, borders.
<b>Violet-crowned</b>	Scrubby open woods, river borders, partial clearings.
<b>Blue-throated</b>	Grassy meadows, moist ravines, open pine forests, pine-oak woods.
<b>Magnificent</b>	Rocky slopes, pine-oak woods, partial clearings, pine forests.
<b>Lucifer</b>	Dry brushy grassland, open pine or pine-oak woods, borders.
<b>Ruby-throated</b>	Patchy woods and pastures, gardens, woodlots and borders.
<b>Black-chinned</b>	Gardens, dry brushy areas, river valleys and semidesert.
<b>Anna's</b>	Open areas with scattered trees, semidesert, gardens, overgrown fields, river border woods.
<b>Costa's</b>	Scrubby thorny semidesert, scattered trees and shrubs, gardens, dry streambeds.
<b>Calliope</b>	Woodland edge, open pine-oak or pine woods, wooded stream valleys, thickets, brush.
<b>Broad-tailed</b>	High mountain meadows, open grassy pine woods, large openings in oak woods.
<b>Rufous</b>	Shrubby pine woods, gardens, parks, partial clearings.
<b>Allen's</b>	Scrubby woods, overgrown clearings, borders.

# REMINISCING ABOUT HUMMINGBIRDS

It was a warm spring evening as I sat outside the Herd Natural Science Center in McKinney enjoying the butterflies and wildflowers around the Wildscape. Suddenly, the quiet was shattered by a buzz of trochlid wings and a young female Ruby-throated Hummingbird came flying into view. As I watched her bustling about the flowers, I could not help but reflect on the stories she might have told.

This young girl had probably just returned from wintering in southern Mexico. What amazing changes she had experienced in the landscape as she journeyed north! What wonderful exotic species had she encountered while in the Yucatan?

I then had to wonder about the changes we are experiencing in Texas today. The habitat loss that these birds must contend with each year. The introduction of exotic species that compete with the native plants these birds need to survive. Had my young hummingbird experienced change? Was she struggling to deal with change over time in her various travels? Yes, and she did not have to leave Texas to do it!

As you undertake changes in your landscape, I would urge you to consider the impacts of each plant and other element of change you make. Let's commit to helping keep Texas looking like Texas!

## FESTIVALS AND EVENTS

Migration season always brings the thought of hummingbird festivals and birding events to mind. This year, changes are afoot with some of our hummingbird events.

In March, Texas Tech held the first hummingbird workshop at their Junction facility. The event was well-attended, with speakers well-versed in their topics presenting information about the flying jewels and their habitats. After the programs, an early migrant Black-chinned male was captured and banded for the group.

August 18-21, Fort Davis will again host the **Davis Mountains Hummingbird Festival**. This year Chihuahuan Desert Research Institute and the merchants association are hosting the event. See CDRI's web page for details.

September festivals will be at Lake Jackson hosted by Gulf Coast Bird Observatory (Sept. 10), and at Rockport hosted by the Chamber of Commerce (Sept. 15-18).

Information about these events available online.

## MISSION STATEMENT

The mission of the Hummingbird Roundup is to improve the conservation of hummingbirds by gathering information about their distribution and providing information to the public. The survey encourages Texans to maintain natural habitat for the birds, properly care for hummingbird feeders and record sightings. Your observations further our knowledge of the hummingbirds of Texas, guide new research efforts and help the Wildlife Diversity Program in its mission to keep these tiny visitors returning each year.

To join the Hummingbird Roundup, please send a \$6 donation with your name, address, county, telephone number and E-mail address to:  
Hummingbird Roundup, Texas Parks and Wildlife Department,  
4200 Smith School Road, Austin, TX 78744

Please remember to return your Roundup 2004 survey forms by **Jan. 20, 2005**, to the address above.

### THE TEXAS HUMMER

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Written by Mark Klym, Editor

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