

A FALL OBSERVATION OF UNUSUAL BEHAVIOR OF RUBY-THROATED HUMMINGBIRDS

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and

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On the evening of 15 September 1997, at about 6:00 p.m., we were sitting on our patio in Webster County, Mississippi. We had two hummingbird feeders near the patio and were enjoying watching about eight to ten hummingbirds, mostly females or hatching-year birds, having a feeding frenzy around one of the feeders. The other feeder was being fiercely guarded by a male.

As we watched, a female or young bird flew up to the male's feeder and the male came quickly to the feeder. They "squared off" facing each other less than a foot apart and then flew into an apple tree about thirty yards from our patio. When they landed in the tree, we thought the male landed on top of the female and that they were mating. Then they flew back towards the feeder. They more or less circled the feeder area and then the female landed on the lawn and spread her tail feathers fan-like approximately ten feet from where we were sitting. The male landed on her back and remained 15-20 seconds. Again, we thought we might be observing copulation.

The female or young bird then made an aerial loop and landed on the lawn behind us and once again spread its tail feathers, but when the male approached, it flew up and hovered about five to six feet from us and appeared to look directly into our faces. The two hummingbirds then suddenly flew off together and landed on our fence. They briefly perched rather close to one another and then flew off.

While we were quick to interpret our observations as "copulation," this is unlikely. Copulations in Ruby-throated Hummingbirds normally last only 2-3 seconds (Robinson et al. 1996). Furthermore, for copulation to occur, the female must twist her tail sideways to allow cloacal contact -- fanning the tail would seem to thwart copulation. Most likely this was a case of defense of the feeder by the male against a young bird. Robert R. Sargent (pers. comm.) notes that the alighting on the ground with the tail

Laying down of body fat for fall migration often results in near doubling of body weight (Norris et al. 1957) and the stresses of an aggressive encounter while in such a condition may well result in "grounding."

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LITERATURE CITED

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