

A Green Violet-ear in Holmes County

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The phone rang shortly after 1 o'clock on the afternoon of August 16, 2005, interrupting a business conversation I was having with my two brothers. I took the call.

"Hartville Cabinet & Design. This is Gabe."

"Hi, Gabe. This is Jake Wengerd."

I winced. I knew this call was going to be about birds "Hey, Jake. What's up?" I responded cheerfully, knowing that my non-birding brothers would be rolling their eyes by now.

"Well, we need someone to help us identify a bird. A guy I work with says he has a strange kind of hummingbird coming to his feeder. His wife noticed it first yesterday. They have lots of ruby-throats and they're sure this is something different."

"What's it look like?" I asked, fully expecting to hear about a little orange bird, and fully prepared to tell Jake he was describing a rufous hummingbird, a bird rare but now annual in Ohio.

"Well, he says it's a really big hummingbird. And it's mostly blue and green. It looks green from the back and blue when it faces front." I was not prepared to hear that.

"Wow. That almost sounds like a green violet-ear," I said, surprised at how I had so casually rolled off the name of a potential first state record.

"A what?"

"A green violet-ear. It's a Central American species that can show up almost anywhere in North America." Reluctant to stir up too much excitement, I added, "I doubt very much this bird is really a violet-ear, but it certainly sounds interesting anyway."

"A few of us are going to go over to see it after work. I thought maybe if you could come over, too, to tell us what it is we're looking at . . ."

"I'd love to," I interrupted eagerly, "I'm sure you don't need my help anyway, but I'll get there as soon as I can."

After receiving directions to the bird's location, the Allen Miller residence near Holmesville in Holmes County, and thanking Jake for calling, I hung up the phone. I'd have to wait till work was done, but more than likely a novice backyard birdwatcher had seen an overstuffed ruby-throat, and with a little imagination had turned it into something exotic.

I turned my attention back to my work and tried to forget about the hummingbird. I didn't succeed entirely. During the more than hour-long drive home I received a call on my cell phone. It was Jake.

"Hey, some of us are at Allen's place and we've just seen the hummingbird." He paused for dramatic effect before continuing. "And it definitely is a green violet-ear."

"I'll be there as soon as I can," I said, pushing hard on the accelerator before our brief conversation ended. I discovered that the distance from home that I had previously thought to be a ten-minute drive could in special circumstances be covered in less than six.

I lurched into the driveway, barged into the house, dashed up the stairs, and greeted my startled wife with a breathless "I gotta go. There's a rare bird a few miles from here that I have to go see. I just stopped in to grab my binocs and the camera." My wife, who thinks she is married to the rarest bird of all, calmly retrieved the camera while I collared my binoculars, and I shot back out the door.

Every mile seemed to stretch forever, and I thought I would never reach my destination, except that the directions had been so precise as to leave no room for doubt. When I finally parked in the driveway next to the barn as I had been instructed, I immediately saw half a dozen or so Amish men huddled some distance from the house. I stepped out of the van and held out my hands palms up. One of them nodded and gave the thumbs-up. I thought that meant the bird was in view right then. I scurried across the yard. "Is the bird still here?" I asked, meaning *is it visible to you right now?* "Yes," one of them said. I felt a surge of anticipation. "It was just here a couple of minutes ago. It'll probably be back again soon." *Oh.*

I took time to survey the landscape. The ground sloped gradually upward, at least a hundred feet of neat lawn separating us and the house, where a hummingbird feeder hung next to a window. A woodlot abutted the back of the property. Jake told me the violet-ear's habit was to venture from the woods to visit the feeder before disappearing back into the trees. Nodding, I raised my binoculars to study a ruby-throat at the feeder. I was not impressed with the view. I eyed the high-end spotting scopes aimed at the feeder and hoped someone would offer me a look when the violet-ear came around again. Holding the camera against the eyepiece of a scope offered the only hope of getting even a marginally decent photo. Even so, I appreciated that the observers were keeping a safe distance and talking quietly, doing their best not to spook the bird. *If only I could be permitted to watch from the house*, I thought to myself. I didn't hold out much hope for that, though, especially when I learned that the homeowners had very recently become parents for the first time.

Soon a young man strode across the yard, whose identity I learned was Allen Miller, the homeowner. I introduced myself. Mr. Miller took one look at me and my camera and asked if I would like to go inside. "If that would be all right with you," I said. I don't think I have ever needed less time to think over a reply to a question.

Allen led me into the living room area of the house before excusing himself to complete his evening chores. I knelt in front of a sofa less than ten feet from the feeder, separated from it only by a pane of glass so clean it may as well have been made of air. Balancing on the balls of my feet, peering over the camera held slightly below eye level and clutched firmly with both hands, I stared at the feeder. While maintaining this position I managed to have an off-and-on conversation with Mrs. Miller, who stood somewhere behind me, without once taking a chance to glance in her direction.

Mrs. Miller told me that she had noticed the hummingbird for the first time around noon of the previous day. It struck her as so unusual that she had called

her husband at work to tell him about it. He had apparently found her description too outlandish to be true, until he had seen the hummingbird for himself that evening. He knew his co-worker Jake Wengerd had an interest in birds, and fortunately Jake's small circle of birding friends included me. That was how I had come to my present position, squatting in front of a sofa, staring at nothing but the constant comings and goings of ordinary ruby-throated hummingbirds. As the minutes passed I slumped to my knees and brought the camera down into my lap. I wondered if perhaps the guys in the yard were keeping the bird from returning to the feeder. Perhaps I was about to record one of the most spectacular near-misses of my birding career.

When Allen returned from his chores he brought with him a video camera. He had attempted to take some video of the bird, but it had turned out badly. I was welcome to take a look if I wanted, however. Thinking that this might be my only opportunity to see anything of the bird, I said I would be glad to. Allen knelt beside me to show me the footage, and just as I took my eyes off the feeder to view the monitor, I heard Mrs. Miller say, "There it is!"

I looked up to see a large hummingbird masquerading as a miniature peacock, its iridescent blue-and-green plumage shimmering in the evening sunlight as it hovered at the feeder. I froze, completely entranced, trying to absorb as many details as quickly as I could. Gracefully decurved long black bill . . . light blue fan-shaped tail with a darker band running through it . . . buffy underparts . . .

"You'd better hurry up or you're going to miss it," whispered Mr. Miller intently, breaking through my reverie and reminding me of my primary mission. I had not been invited inside the house just so I could attain a killer look for myself. I fumbled with the camera, and by the time I got the feeder in focus, the hummer was gone.

"I'm sorry," I mumbled.

"Don't worry. It'll be back soon," Allen prophesied. This time I would be ready. I propped the camera on the back of the sofa to use as a makeshift tripod, put the feeder in focus and waited. It didn't take long. This time the violet-ear perched at the feeder and I reeled off a half dozen shots without taking a breath.

When the bird flew, I stood up. My right leg was shaking. "Did you get some good pictures?" asked Allen. I said that I thought I had, even though I couldn't claim much for variety. Taking six quick photos of a mostly motionless bird will produce six pictures that look almost identical. I discovered. I didn't care. I had seen the violet-ear and I had photographed it. Let photographers better than I get the artistic poses.

That prompted my next question of the Millers: "This is a remarkable bird, a first state record. If I announce this find to the birding community and you give permission, birders from all over the state will want to come, some as early as tomorrow morning. Would that be all right with you?"

This was something they hadn't considered. They hesitated, imagining hordes of strangers descending upon their yard. "I don't know . . ." one of them faltered. "What would you do?"

My dream is to someday discover a bird on my property that birders from all over the state will want to come see. To reassure them, I said, "In your case, it probably won't be for long, maybe only a few days." Sensing their disappointment at this news, I added, "Or maybe a few weeks if you're lucky.

Green violet-ears usually don't stick around for long." This information I had committed to memory to aid me in resisting the temptation to chase after this species when it had been reported in other states. I could hardly believe I had just observed this species only ten miles from my home. As a clincher, I added that I knew birders to be among the most decently-behaved people I had ever encountered. That was good enough for the Millers.

Before I left the house, the green violet-ear performed an encore. As it hovered at the feeder for a lengthy period, I drank in the sight of it through my binoculars. The purple patch at the side of the head for which the bird is named stood out prominently. I noted that it wasn't an isolated patch of color at all, but continued around the nape and onto the breast, giving the bird the appearance of wearing a stethoscope. The spectacular close-up view of this stunning rarity prompted my right leg to shake more violently than ever.

I went home and posted the discovery of this extraordinary bird to the Ohio birding list, confident that by the next day many others would share my excitement first-hand. But, alas, the green violet-ear was never seen again on the Millers' property. More than a hundred hopeful birders signed up on a register the Millers put out. I have since heard an interesting third-hand account that a family several miles from the Millers were said to have seen a strange hummingbird in their garden for a few days some time in the latter part of August. Did the violet-ear choose on the morning of 17 August to take up residence in a different neighborhood down the road, rather than skeddaddling off to some distant part of the world? We likely will never know for sure.

What we do know is that the green violet-ear *Colibri thalassinus* is an exceptional find anywhere in the Lower 48. Since the first ABA-area report of it at Texas's Santa Ana National Wildlife Refuge in 1961, it has been recorded more than fifty times, most often in Texas. But reports continue to multiply, and since 1990 the species has been recorded in Alabama, Alberta, Arkansas, California, Colorado, Iowa, Kentucky, Louisiana, Michigan, Mississippi, Missouri, Minnesota, New Jersey, New Mexico, North Carolina, Oklahoma, Ontario, Pennsylvania, South Carolina, Virginia, West Virginia, and Wisconsin. Now add to that Ohio, pending acceptance by the Ohio Bird Records Committee, making it the 24th North American state/province with a green-violet ear record.



Artwork by Donald Sutherland.