

Rufous Hummingbirds in eastern North America

*Documenting the little-recognized problem of the
identification of hummingbirds in the East in fall*

Albert E. Conway and Susan Roney Drennan

THE FIRST SPECIMEN of the Rufous Hummingbird (*Selasphorus rufus*) east of the Mississippi River lay incorrectly identified in the collection of the Charleston, South Carolina Museum for 19 years (Sprunt 1929). The 1928 meeting of the American Ornithologists' Union was held at the Museum, and it was then that J. H. Riley of the United States National Museum recognized that what was labelled a Ruby-throated Hummingbird (*Archilochus colubris*) was actually a Rufous Hummingbird. It had been captured in a Charleston garden December 18, 1909 by Edward A. Heyer. Realizing that to be a very late date for a hummingbird, Mr. Heyer presented the specimen to the Museum. It seems not to have occurred to anyone that it was not a Ruby-throated, then thought to be the only hummingbird found east of the Mississippi.

The Rufous Hummingbird was not recorded again in the East until November 26, 1934 when the mother of Robert McClanahan saw a hummingbird in their yard at Pensacola, Florida. It was identified the next day by Robert McClanahan. He subsequently found a dead Rufous three days later. Two others were seen in December, 1934 (*Auk* 52: 187).

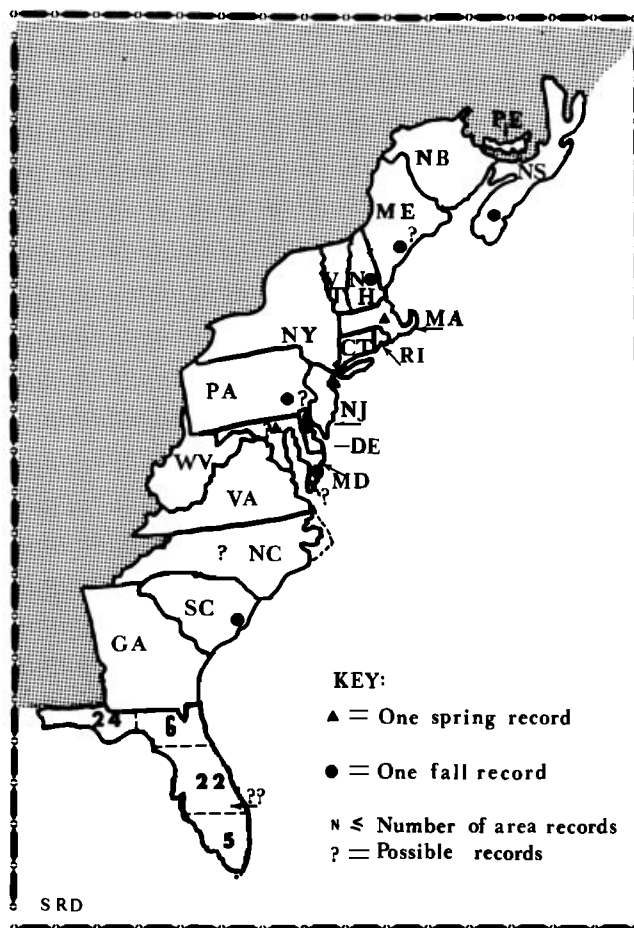
Conway's interest in eastern records of Rufous Hummingbird was sparked by an article in a Delaware newspaper, that reported that on November 27, 1978, Mrs. W. G. Crichton, Jr., of New Castle, Delaware, found a live hummingbird in some cockleburs (*Xanthium* sp.) brought into her home as decoration. Although the bird appeared to be well and took sugared water, it died that night. Conway suspected that the bird might not be a Ruby-throated Hummingbird and obtained the specimen. David M. Niles, of the Delaware Museum of Natural History, confirmed my feeling that it was a Rufous Hummingbird, adding that he considered it an immature male.

Rufous Hummingbird had occurred

once in Charleston, South Carolina, possibly once in both Emmitsburg, Maryland and Jamesville, Virginia, once in Orono, Maine and at least 13 or 14 times in the Florida panhandle before it was recorded in the northern peninsula of Florida, November 2, 1958, at Merritt Island.

OTHER THAN THE RECORDS of Rufous Hummingbird listed, four other western hummingbird species have been reliably documented east of the Mississippi: Allen's Hummingbird (*Selasphorus sasin*), an adult male in Reserve, Louisiana October 8, 1975 through March 16, 1976 for the first record in that state (*AB* 30:730); March 22, 1978 one identified in New Orleans (*AB* 32: 1020); Broad-tailed Hummingbird (*Selasphorus platycercus*) occurred in Baton Rouge from December, 1952 through January 7, 1953 (Lowery, 1974; (Buff-bellied Hummingbird (*Amazilia yucatanensis*) has been documented on the New Orleans Christmas Bird Count (*AB* 29: 702) as well as with wintering over in several parishes in Louisiana. It has been documented in that state with a specimen collected March 28, 1974 (*AB* 28: 651), as well as with sight records well-substantiated with color photographs

taken in 1965, 1973 and during the winter of 1973-74, leaving no doubt as to the identity of the bird. Although the Buff-bellied Hummingbird breeds in the lower Rio Grande Valley in Texas and south through eastern Mexico to Guatemala and Belize, two individuals were recorded May 10-11, 1964 in Oak Bluffs, Martha's Vineyard, Massachusetts (*AFN* 18:496). Black-chinned Hummingbird (*Archilochus alexandri*) occurs fairly regularly in the southern part of Louisiana in winter, especially in lush gardens and areas of New Orleans where people keep hummingbird feeders. This species has occurred occasionally in Florida and its identity has been documented with a specimen taken in Panama City, Florida (January 6, 1941). Additionally, there are records of Florida birds in Pensacola April 27, 1964 and at Jacksonville January 12-13, 1974. This primarily western species, has strayed as far north and east as 6 miles west of Antigonish, Nova Scotia on May 30, 1964 (*AFN* 18:495-96). Additionally, there is a possible but not definitive sight



record of Broad-billed Hummingbird (*Cyanthus latirostris*) for Pensacola, Florida seen December 27 and 31, 1953.

EVIDENCE CERTAINLY INDICATES that the Rufous Hummingbird is the most likely of all of these species to visit or overwinter in the southeastern United States.

It has been documented as far north as Nova Scotia and as far south as Homestead, Florida. Along the Atlantic coast at least nine have been reported as far south as South Carolina and a minimum of 50-55 birds have been recorded in Florida. Identification has been amply confirmed by a minimum of seven specimens; at least five males have been photographed. Dates of occurrence range from July 18 through May 1; with June being the only month with no records. Of the aggregate records, over one-half have occurred in November and December.

Rufous Hummingbirds migrate in autumn to Central Mexico, with the adult males leaving the breeding grounds first: from about mid-to late June. Migrants begin their return to the north approximately late January or early February. Northward (Spring) migrations is probably completed by mid-April, at the latest.

There are several possible explanations why the Rufous Hummingbird is the most common western hummingbird thus far recorded in the East north of Florida. Its breeding range extends as far north as latitude 61°N, in southeastern Alaska. Easterly migrational drift from there could explain its appearance in Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Maine and Nova Scotia. It is abundant throughout its range in North America. Crossing the Continental Divide might not present a real obstacle since it is found regularly and in numbers well above the tree line in the Rockies.

A. R. Phillips (*Condor* 77:199) shows the apparent migration route of adult male *S. rufus* to be elliptical, an almost oval path, which takes it southeastward in mid-summer along and atop the eastern ridges of the Rockies, then westward approximately mid-to-late January and northwestward along the west coasts of Mexico and the United States beginning in February and lasting through late April and May. A definite coastal route, west of the Sierra Nevadas, is followed, proceeding northward, during spring migration. This may account for the scarcity of spring records in the East.

Rufous Hummingbird records east of the Mississippi River

Date	Location	Record	Reference
July 18-22, 1976	Contoocook, NH	ad. ♂, †	AB 30:929
July 28, 1957	Orono, ME	one ♂, †	AB 31:231
August 7, 1975	St. Petersburg, FL	ad. ♂, †	AB 30:57
August 8-9, 1967	Bedford, N.S.	one ♂, †	AFN 22:11
Aug. 28 - Sept. 3, 1966	Rockledge, FL	? (presumed one)†	Fla. Flid. Nat. 6:24
Sept. 8 - Nov. 30, 1971	Rockledge, FL	min. 4 indivs.	AB 26:52
Sept. 12, 1963	Ocean City, MD	one, *	AFN 18:22
Sept. 18-19, 1975	Jacksonville, FL	one bird, †	AB 30:57
Sept. 19, 1965	Fort Lauderdale, FL	one bird, photo	Fla. Flid. Nat. 6:24
Sept. 19, 1975	Panama City, FL	one bird, †	AB 30:85
Sept. 24, 1963	Rockledge, FL	one ♂, †	AFN 18:26
Sept. 26, 1968	Rockledge, FL	one bird, †	AFN 23:38
Sept. 27, 1977	Delray Beach, FL	one bird, †	AB 32:195
Sept. 29, 1967	Rockledge, FL	one ♂, †	AFN 22:29
Oct. 7 - Nov. 2, 1972	Rockledge, FL	one/two ♂♂, †	AB 27:47
Oct. 19, 1974	Homestead, FL	one imm. ♀, photo (netted)	AB 29:46
Oct. 29, 1954	St. Andrews, FL	one bird, †	Sprunt, Addendum 11
Oct. 29, 1975	Gainesville, FL	one bird, †	AB 30:57
Nov. 2, 1958	Merritt Island, FL	one bird, †	AFN 13:23
Nov. 3, 1973	Cocoa, FL	one bird, †	AB 28:43
Nov. 5, 1969	Maitland, FL	one/two birds, †	AFN 24:36
Nov. (early), 1969	Altamonte Springs, FL	one/two birds, †	AFN 24:36
Nov. 6, 1975	Devon, PA	one ♂, captured — alive — to Philadelphia Zoo (Nov. 14)	AB 30:44-45
Nov. 6, 1976	Gainesville, FL	one bird, †	AB 31:168
Nov. 16, 1950	Pensacola, FL	one bird, †	AFN 5:23
Nov. 16, 1954	Rockledge, FL	one bird, †	AB 29:46
Nov. 17, 1973	Cocoa, FL	one bird, †	AB 28:43
Nov. 18-19, 1952	Pensacola, FL	one imm. bird, †	AFN 7:20
Nov. 18-27, 1967	Rockledge, FL	one ♂, †	AFN 22:29
Nov. 22, 1952	Pensacola, FL	one ad. ♂, †	AFN 7:20
Nov. 23, 1975	High Springs, FL	one bird *	AB 30:57
Nov. 24, 1946	Pensacola, FL	one bird, †	AFN 1:7
Nov. 26-27, 1934	Pensacola, FL	one/two birds, †	Auk 52:187 (1935)
Nov. 29, 1934	Pensacola, FL	one bird, *	Auk 52:187 (1935)
Nov. 27, 1978	New Castle, DE	one imm. ♂, *	AB 33:130-33
Nov. 29, 1971	Jacksonville, FL	one bird, †	AB 26:52
Nov. 30, 1958	Pensacola, FL	one bird, †	AFN 13:300
Dec. 1, 1959	Pensacola, FL	one bird, †	AFN 14:316
Dec. 1, 1975	Pensacola, FL	one bird, †	AB 30:730
Dec. (early), 1949	Pensacola, FL	one bird, †	AFN 4:206
Dec. 8, 1935	Pensacola, FL	one bird, †	Sprunt, 1954
Dec. 10, 1934	Pensacola, FL	two birds, †	
Dec. 12, 14, 17, 1935	Pensacola, FL	one bird (presumed)†	Auk 53:217 (1936)
Dec. 13, 1953 —			
Mar. 27, 1954	Pensacola, FL	one imm. bird, †	AFN 8:256
Dec. 14, 1951	Pensacola, FL	one imm. ♂, †	AFN 6:200
Dec. 15, 1975 —			
Feb. 15, 1976	Pensacola, FL	one bird, †	AB 30:730
Dec. 18, 1909	Charleston, SC	one bird, *	Auk 46:237-38
Dec. 26-28, 1963	Pensacola, FL	one bird, †	AFN 18:362
Dec. 1941 —	Pensacola, FL	one bird, †	Aud. Mag. 44:2, Part 2: 7 (1942)
Jan. 6, 1942			
Winter Season			
Dec. 1, 1956 —		one bird, †	
Mar. 31, 1957	Pensacola, FL	("present as usual")	AFN 11:272
Winter Season			
Dec. 1, 1971 —		two birds, †	
Mar. 31, 1972	Cocoa, FL	("wintered")	AB 26:595
Jan. 16, 1965	Lantana, FL	one bird, †	AFN 19:373
Jan. 17, 1974	Rockledge, FL	one bird, †	AB 28:630
Jan. 29, 1976 —			
Feb. 20, 1976	Gainesville, FL	one bird, †	AB 30:710
Jan. 30 —			
Feb. 24, 1959	Rockledge, FL	one bird, †	AFN 13:288

(Continued next page)

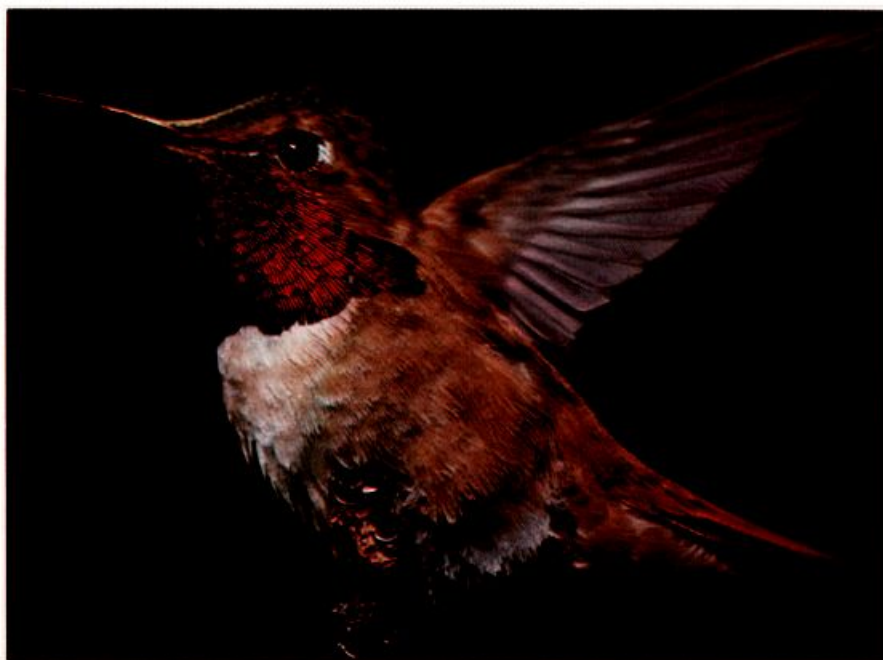
Rufous Hummingbird records east of the Mississippi River

Date	Location	Record	Reference
Jan. (3 unspecified dates), 1965	Pensacola, FL	? bird(s), †	AFN 19:386
Feb. 7, 1964	Kendall, FL	one bird, photo	AFN 18:349
Mar. 19-20, 1976	Lakeland, FL	one bird, †	AB 30:710
Mar. 22 — April 1, 1974	Tallahassee, FL	one bird, †	AB 28:630
April 15-17, 1978	Newton, MA	one bird, photo	AB 32:1139
May 1, 1971	Lilypons, MD	one bird, †	Atlan. Natur. 26:125-6

* = specimen † = sighting

Additional possible Rufous Hummingbird records east of the Mississippi River

Date	Location	Comment	Reference
Sept. 8, 1975	Bar Harbor, ME	"one imm. <i>Selasphorus</i> "	AB 30:33
Oct. 13, 1962	Ft. Pierce, FL	"probable Rufous"	AFN 17:26
Nov. 2-4, 1976	Raleigh, NC	"♀ <i>Selasphorus</i> "	AB 31:165
Nov. 8, 1952	Emmitsburg, MD	"rufous-backed"	Md. Birdlife 10:36-7
Nov. 10, 1959	Philadelphia, PA	"rufous-colored"	AFN 14:22
Nov. 30, 1952	Jamesville, VA	"rufous-back"	Raven 24:24-5
Jan. 11-12, 1962	Ft. Pierce, FL	"presumed to be a Rufous"	AFN 14:303



Rufous Hummingbird, San Juan Nat'l Forest, Colo. Photo/J. Russell Hoverman.

Records of Rufous Hummingbird in the East may in fact simply be a case of exceptional stragglers drifted too far east while proceeding southeastward in fall. Many of the more hardy individuals have adapted themselves to the southeastern and central southern climates with records of birds overwintering. Examples are one at Hattiesburg, Mississippi; six on Dauphin Island and one at Bayou La Batre, Alabama; and four at Le Metairie, Louisiana, all overwintered in 1975-76. There are also several records of Rufous Hummingbirds wintering in the New Orleans, Louisiana area.

ALL FALL HUMMINGBIRDS should be studied to determine species. Any hummingbird showing buffy underparts on the flanks or rump or which has rufous basally on the tail is almost certainly not a Ruby-throated.

Only some adult male Rufous Hummingbirds are identifiable in the field — with absolute certainty. An adult male has a complete red gorget on its throat and its tail is very extensively rufous. That will separate the Rufous from Ruby-throated male; but not necessarily from adult male Allen's Hummingbird. If an adult male is not a Ruby-throated

and has a completely rufous back (showing no trace of green whatsoever) it can then be safely called a Rufous Hummingbird. However, if an adult male does show green in the back it may not safely be called an Allen's because some Rufous Hummingbirds show varying amounts of green in the back. Female Black-chinneds are indistinguishable from their Ruby-throated counterparts but the males can usually be separated. The upper portion of the gorget of the Black-chinned is black and the lower portion is purple. That of the male Ruby-throated is a fiery geranium red. In the field non-breeding birds not in adult male plumage can almost never be identified as to sex or age. This should not however, discourage the birder from closely scrutinizing all hummingbirds seen during the normal migration season. The identification of the females and immature males of the Rufous and Broad-tailed is difficult if not impossible unless the bird is in the hand. Lowery (1974) gives helpful hints for separating these species. More detailed analyses of plumages and measurements of *Selasphorus* hummingbirds can be found in papers by Stiles (1971, 1972) and Ortiz Crespo (1972).

Careful observation of every hummingbird may lead to the addition to the list of records of the Rufous or other western hummingbirds in the East.

LITERATURE CITED

FISK, ERMA J., HENRY M. STEVENSON and HERBERT W. KALE II. Records of the Rufous Hummingbird in Florida. *Florida Field Naturalist*, 6:23-26 1978.

LOWERY, G. H., JR. 1974. Louisiana Birds, 3rd edition. Louisiana State University Press, Baton Rouge.

ORTIZ-CRESPO, F. I. 1972. A New Method to Separate Immature and Adult Hummingbirds. *Auk* 89:851-857.

SPRUNT, ALEXANDER, JR. 1929. The Rufous Hummingbird (*Selasphorus rufus*) in South Carolina. *Auk* 46:237-238.

SPRUNT, ALEXANDER, JR. 1954. Florida Bird Life. Nat'l Aud. Soc., N.Y.; Addendum June, 1963.

STILES, F. G. 1971. On the Field Identification of California Hummingbird *California Birds* 2:41-54.

— 1972. Age and Sex Determination in Rufous and Allen's Hummingbird. *Condor* 74:25-32.

— 713 Woodsdale Road, Wilmington Delaware 19809 (Conway), and American Birds, 950 Third Ave., NYC 10022 (Drennan)