

Kenn Kaufman THE PRACTICED EYE

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Lucifer Hummingbird Identification

Why is the forked tail of the male Lucifer Hummingbird depicted so prominently and so universally, if it never shows up in the field? The bird's name may exert a subtle influence. The Satanic undertones of the name "Lucifer" may bring to mind fanciful images of a prancing Halloween Devil, pitchfork in hand; if Lucifer has a tail, it should be forked.

A CREATURE THAT FEEDS ON nectar, that must have a constant supply of flowers to survive, ought to choose its surroundings carefully. Most hummingbirds, in fact, inhabit moist places, and they reach their greatest diversity in fog-drenched zones of tropical mountains, where rainfall and flowers are abundant all year. But a few hummers are adapted to the opposite extreme. A good example is the Lucifer Hummingbird (*Calothorax lucifer*), a denizen of desert hills, which barely reaches the southwestern United States.

You are not likely to mistake a Lucifer Hummingbird for anything else if you see it well. No, the mistakes all run in the opposite direction. In the isolation of a bird-guide plate the Lucifer seems totally distinctive; but in the field, some other hummers can seem to duplicate many of its "diagnostic" features.

There are some groups of birds for which oversimplified field marks are especially likely to lead you astray. The hummingbirds represent one such group. Every statement about a hummingbird field mark seems to need some sort of qualifier or amendment, and the lack of such qualifying statements has led to many errors. For example, birders often have iden-

tified other species as Lucifer Hummingbirds based on "obvious" field marks: curved bill; forked tail (males); buffy underparts (females).

That bill shape is definitely worth noting, but it should be noted with caution. Many birders have never looked closely at bill shape on hummingbirds, until they find themselves in a region where the Lucifer is possible—and then every hummer is scrutinized for that decurved bill. Unfortunately, *most* of our hummingbirds can show at least a slight curvature to the bill. This curvature can be noticeable on Costa's Hummingbird (*Calypte costae*), and even fairly pronounced on Black-chinned Hummingbird (*Archilochus alexandri*), two species that overlap with the Lucifer in parts of the American Southwest.

But the buffy underparts of the female Lucifer ought to be distinctive, right? Right—but again, only if this characteristic is fully understood. There is a lot of individual variation in the extent of this color. The "classic" pattern, often illustrated, is for the entire area of the underparts to be uniformly washed with rich buff. Most of the individuals I've seen, however, have not been so evenly colored: they have been richer buff on the sides of the chest, paling somewhat on the upper throat and paling to white at the center of the lower belly.

Female-plumaged *Selasphorus* hummers, like Rufous Hummingbird (*S. rufus*), may show up anywhere in the desert during migration. Despite their buff tones underneath, these birds have such short, straight bills that they are unlikely to be turned into Lucifers. Other hummers found in or near the desert do not ordinarily show any buff underneath. However, nectar-feeding birds are often discolored with pollen. I know of several cases in which purported Lucifers have turned out to be female Black-chinned or Costa's hummingbirds, with their throats heavily dusted with



Figure 1. Lucifer Hummingbirds. Left: immature male, as seen in late summer. Center: adult female. Right: adult male.

yellow pollen.

The most interesting pseudo-Lucifer I've seen was in a situation where a female had been reported at a feeder, and a number of birders were gathered to wait for its appearance. Every time a bird approached from a certain angle, a chorus went up: "There it is!" "Is that it?" "No, wait..." Finally it became obvious what was going on. Birds coming from a certain angle were picking up light reflected from the red plastic feeder, suffusing them with a warm buffy glow. We never did see a real Lucifer there.

But female hummingbirds are often confusing, anyway. What about the male?

A check of almost any bird guide will show the male Lucifer with a conspicuously forked tail, spread to show off its distinctive shape. This bothered me the first few times I saw males in the field: try as I might, I could rarely catch even a hint of any tail fork. It took a lot of time to conclude that this was the normal situation. When the adult male Lucifer is perched or hovering, its tail is virtually always folded into a long, narrow point.

So why is this forked tail depicted so prominently and universally? Part of the reason may be the species' remote range; artists are likely to be

much more familiar with illustrations than with the bird itself. Then, too, the name may exert a subtle influence. The name "Lucifer," with its Satanic undertones, may bring to mind fanciful images of a prancing Halloween Devil, pitchfork in hand; if Lucifer has a tail, it might as well be forked.

Lucifer Hummingbird is easily overlooked, simply because it is a desert bird, favoring habitat that birders avoid.

That name, actually, has nothing to do with any allusion to the devil in this case. "Lucifer" came from Latin as an adjective meaning "light-bringing" or "light-bearing." Apparently William Swainson, who described the species to science, was impressed by the large iridescent gorget area of the male. The name "Lucifer" also has been applied sometimes to the

morning star, which seems to bring in the light of day. I have no idea why the name should have been applied to the mythological fallen archangel. But the association does seem to add a bit of a rakish aura to this hummingbird of the badlands.

Lucifer Hummingbird is not really a rare bird, just "observationally rare." Its stronghold is the high, dry central plateau of northern Mexico, and it spills across the border into the United States. For many years it was considered a specialty of the Big Bend region of western Texas. There were two old specimens from southeastern Arizona, but it was not recorded there with any regularity until the 1970s, and its presence in southwestern New Mexico did not become generally known until the 1980s. It's difficult to say whether this reflects an increase in numbers of Lucifers or just an increase in observers' awareness of them.

The latter could well be the case. Lucifer Hummingbird is easily overlooked, simply because it is a desert bird, favoring habitat that birders avoid. Steep, rocky hillsides with scattered spiny plants can represent prime Lucifer country. Birders who work the denser vegetation along the canyon floor may miss this species altogether. But persistent researchers



Figure 2. Studies of Lucifer Hummingbirds. Adult males (top right, center left, lower left) look distinctly long-tailed, but the forked shape of the tail (so emphasized in bird guides) is almost never visible under normal circumstances. The iridescent gorget area is large, and usually reflects magenta, but at some angles it varies toward duller violet or brighter red; there is often a touch of indigo visible near the back corners of the gorget. An area of rufous on the lower flanks is sometimes prominent, sometimes hidden by the wings.

Adult females (top left, top center) also look somewhat long-tailed, although less so than adult males. The amount of buff color around the face and chest is rather variable. A conspicuous feature is the face pattern: a dusky patch on the ear-coverts is clearly set off from the dark nape and crown, and some buff color washes up into the resulting pale postocular stripe. Although there is rufous at the base of some tail feathers, this color is usually hard to see except at close range from below. Immature male (lower right) in late

summer usually begins to develop some color on the throat, while retaining the buffy underparts and the tail shape and pattern of the female. Birds in all plumages often perch in a hunched-over posture. When feeding, they hover with the tail held down and relatively still, without the active tail-flipping often shown by Costa's and Black-chinned hummingbirds. A common callnote of Lucifer Hummingbird is a sibilant, doubled "tsi-chip."



Figure 3. Grading on a curve. Top two birds: female-plumaged Lucifer Hummingbirds, to show variation in bill shape. Third from top: female Black-chinned Hummingbird. Bottom: female Costa's Hummingbird. The decurved bill of the Lucifer Hummingbird is often advertised as a sufficient field mark in itself for identifying the bird. However, the curvature in the bill of the Lucifer is variable; and several other hummingbird species also have slightly decurved bills.

who have spent enough time looking, or people who have put up feeders in the vicinity of appropriately stark hillsides, have found that the Lucifer is a fairly common summer resident in a few areas north of the border.

We are gradually learning that long-distance vagrancy is possible even for those hummingbirds that normally migrate only short distances. Recent records of Violet-crowned Hummingbird in northern California, and Broad-billed Hummingbird in Ontario, are proof enough of that. It seems likely that a wandering Lucifer will eventually stray west to California or east at least to Louisiana. Such a vagrant would have to be documented with care, however, because the Lucifer has a close relative in southern Mexico—the so-called Beautiful Hummingbird (*Calothorax pulcher*)—which is almost identical. Details of certain tail feathers are the main distinguishing characters. As with other tough hummers, this becomes a job for licensed banders or for well-equipped photographers. However, *pulcher* does not seem like a very likely northward stray.

Acknowledgments

My illustrations for this column were based on sketches made in the field and at the Arizona-Sonora Desert Museum, Tucson. I was able to check details against photographs loaned to me by Rick Bowers, and against specimens in the collection of the Department of Ecology and Evolutionary Biology, University of Arizona, Tucson; I'm grateful to Stephen M. Russell and Thomas R. Huels for allowing me access to that collection. In addition, I received good advice on illustrative technique from Keith Hansen.