

A VIOLET-CROWNED HUMMINGBIRD IN CALIFORNIA

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Sometime during the morning of 6 July 1976 William Haggard of Santa Paula, Ventura County, California noted a strange hummingbird at one of his feeders, located in an oak-chapparal canyon. He identified the bird as a Violet-crowned Hummingbird (*Amazilia verticalis*). On 17 July we visited the feeders and observed the hummingbird several times at very close range. The following description was obtained:

Crown, and sides of head above eye, dull violet. Upper back greenish, slowly becoming brownish on lower back. Upper surface of tail dark brown, contrasting with lighter brown of lower back. Bill red. Underparts and sides of neck, white. Indistinct dusky speckling on sides.

We took color photographs which are on file with the authors. The bird was subsequently seen by many observers and remained at the Haggard residence until late December 1976. It was also seen for a few days in early July 1977. During the early part of its stay the bird visited the feeder area once every 45 minutes or so, but later the visits became less frequent with one 2 week period in the late fall when it was not seen at all.

This observation constitutes the first record of the Violet-crowned Hummingbird in California, and the first anywhere outside of Arizona, New Mexico and the Republic of Mexico. The normal range of the species extends from northeastern Sonora, extreme southeastern Arizona, extreme southwestern New Mexico and western Chihuahua south to Puebla, Guerrero and Chiapas. The species occurs in the northern part of its range only during the breeding season and winters from southern Sonora southward (AOU 1957).

The range of this hummingbird has apparently been spreading slowly northward during the past 70 years. The first specimen for the United States was collected on 4 July 1905 in the Huachuca Mountains of Arizona and subsequent collections were made in the Chiricahua Mountains in 1925 and at Patagonia, Arizona in 1948 (Levy 1958). In the early 1960s the Violet-crowned Hummingbird began to show up almost every summer at feeders in Ramsey Canyon, Arizona (Sheppard 1968). In the summer of 1959 the first breeding record for the United States was established with the finding of several nests in Guadalupe Canyon in extreme southwestern New Mexico and extreme southeastern Arizona (Zimmerman and Levy 1960). Until the fall of 1970, however, no Violet-crowned Hummingbird had appeared in any area in the United States outside the mountains of southern Arizona and New Mexico. But in late 1970 an individual appeared at a feeder in Tucson, Arizona and remained until late February 1971 (Snider 1971). This was the first winter record for the United States. Another was seen in the vicinity of Tucson in October 1972 (Monson 1973). The trend to more northerly and westerly observations is continuing as is seen in the appearance of an individual in Prescott, Arizona, between 11 and 19 October 1975 (J. Witzeman pers. comm.).

While the taxonomy of this species has a long and confusing history well beyond the scope of this note, it is generally believed there are three races: *A. v. violiceps*, *A. v. viridifrons* and *A. v. ellioti* (Wetmore 1947, Phillips 1965). The first two races mentioned occur from Puebla, Morelos and Oaxaca southward, while *ellioti* is the northern race and thus the one most likely to occur in California.

Examination of 129 skins at the Moore Laboratory of Ornithology at Occidental College revealed that the Santa Paula bird did not show the typical plumage

of the northerly race of the Violet-crowned Hummingbird. The bird in Santa Paula had a brown tail; only 8% of the specimens examined showed brown tails. The two southerly races have substantial iridescent bronze coloring in the tail. Furthermore the tail was darker than the back. Sixteen percent of specimens showed tails (either greenish or brown) darker than the back. There was no seasonal variation in the color of the tail. It is logical to assume that the bird in Santa Paula was a representative of *elliotti*. In the first place, a few *elliotti* do have brown tails. Secondly, and more important, the California bird had none of the bronze tinge so noticeable in the tails of southern subspecies.

It was impossible to determine the sex of the bird seen in Santa Paula. Some authors stress the blue-violet crown of the male as opposed to dull greenish-blue in females and immatures. Inspection of skins revealed very substantial overlap in the colors and brightness of the crown between the sexes, thus casting doubt on the validity of this field mark.

We have conducted an extensive investigation into the possibility that the bird was an escapee from captivity, having discussed the matter with several local authorities on hummingbirds, including Luis Baptista of the Moore Laboratory, Donald Bleitz of the Bleitz Wildlife Foundation and the curators of birds at the Los Angeles and San Diego zoos. All believe the California bird was not an escapee. We were able to find only one instance of Violet-crowns kept in captivity. About 8 or 9 years ago, Bleitz owned two birds which he eventually sent to the San Diego Zoo. Zoo records show these birds died in May 1970 (A. Risser pers. comm.). We also made inquiries of the Santa Barbara Zoo and several retail pet dealers in the Ventura and Los Angeles areas. None of these sources knew of any hummingbirds of any kind recently kept in captivity in southern California. We also found that a roof blew off an aviary in Hawthorne, Los Angeles County, 8 or 9 years ago. Sixty birds escaped; none were Violet-crowns (D. Bleitz pers. comm.). Detailed records of this investigation are on file with the authors and with the California Bird Records Committee. Based on all the information at hand, we believe that the chances that this was an escaped bird are minimal.

We would like to express our gratitude to Mr. and Mrs. William Haggard for reporting the presence of the bird and for their kindness in permitting many people to come onto their property to view it. Thanks are also due Luis Baptista for allowing us to examine the excellent series of skins at the Moore Laboratory and to Donald Bleitz for his assistance on the "escapee" question.

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