



The Louisiana
Winter Hummingbird Project
2011-2012 ANNUAL REPORT

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In a word... *Wow!*

Sometime in mid to late October, the Louisiana Winter Hummingbird team realized that it was likely to be a good winter season. Just how good, at the time, we had no idea, but with good numbers of immature hummingbirds already showing up, we sensed the stage was being set for a nice turnaround from the largely lackluster seasons of recent years.

To put it mildly, we were not disappointed.

Many hosts, if not most, reported record numbers of wintering hummingbirds for the season. The banders were pushed to their limits responding to reports of more and more winter birds, with new birds showing up well into the end of the winter months. When all was said and done, nearly 900 wintering hummingbirds were handled by the banding teams, by far a record for the state - numbers that were unthinkable even in the boom years of the early part of the 21st century.

This report summarizes the activity of the past winter season by Nancy Newfield, Linda Beall, Dave Patton, Steve Locke, Paul Dickson, and Erik Johnson, continuing a project begun in 1979 to investigate the phenomenon of hummingbirds wintering in Louisiana. Newfield began the study at a time when wintering hummingbirds anywhere in the southeastern U.S. were believed either to be “vagrants”, hopelessly lost, or else Ruby-throated Hummingbirds that somehow failed to migrate, with a further assumption that any such hummingbird was likely doomed to die when freezing temperatures arrived. Years of study have proven that many of these birds not only survive the winters, but return year after year to the same sites. Moreover, breeding season and migration studies show virtually all of our local breeding populations have left by mid to late August, so the hordes of Ruby-throated Hummingbirds swarming at feeders and in our

Banding By the Numbers

	<i>Newly Banded</i>	<i>Returnees</i>	<i>Foreign Re-Encounters</i>	<i>Foreign Reports</i>	<i>Total Handled</i>
Buff-bellied Hummingbird (<i>Amazilia yucatanensis</i>).....	14	7	1	0	22
Ruby-throated Hummingbird (<i>Archilochus colubris</i>).....	60	6	0	1	67
Black-chinned Hummingbird (<i>Archilochus alexandri</i>).....	110	8	1	0	119
Calliope Hummingbird (<i>Stellula calliope</i>).....	35	0	0	0	35
Broad-tailed Hummingbird (<i>Selasphorus platycercus</i>).....	11	1	0	0	12
Rufous Hummingbird (<i>Selasphorus rufus</i>).....	564	37	5	2	608
Allen’s Hummingbird (<i>Selasphorus sasin</i>).....	21	2	0	0	23
Total	815	61	7	3	886

Definitions: “Newly Banded” means a bird banded for the first time this season. “Returnees” are birds that were banded in previous seasons and returned to the original banding site (or near by) and which were recaptured by the original bander. “Foreign Re-Encounters” are birds banded at another site by another bander, but caught this season at one of our sites. “Foreign Reports” are those birds which were banded by the Louisiana team, but were recaptured elsewhere outside the bander’s own area.

gardens in September are migrants from elsewhere, presumably points north and east. Until recently, none of our winter-banded Ruby-throated Hummingbirds had ever been re-encountered during the breeding season; however, we recently learned that one banded by Beall in Covington in 2005 was found dead later that same year in Manitoba, Canada - suggesting some of our wintering Ruby-throated Hummingbirds come from quite a distance!

The 1974 edition of *Louisiana Birds* by George H. Lowery listed five species of hummingbirds known to occur in the state, including only a single record for Broad-tailed, three records of Buff-bellied, and only eight records for Black-chinned. At the time the project was initiated, two other species had been documented; today, the state list stands at thirteen species of hummingbirds.

METHODOLOGY

This study differs from most passerine banding studies, which usually rely on mist-netting birds in a given area, often with strict protocols for running the nets on a set schedule and for fixed durations. Because the project targets specific birds, remote-controlled cage or mesh traps are used with hummingbird feeders inside to catch the birds for banding. Most birds are color-marked with water-soluble Liquid Paper, tinted in various colors; marked birds usually need not be recaptured during the same season to verify their identity.

LOCATION

Virtually all birds were handled in the southern third of the state, from the Interstate-10/12 line south. Patton covers the western part of the state, centered on Lafayette but extending to Baton Rouge. Beall covered the Florida Parishes east from Baton Rouge, concentrating primarily in the St. Tammany Parish area. Newfield covered much of Baton Rouge, the River Parishes, the New Orleans metropolitan area, and the Houma/Terrebonne region. Locke primarily assisted Newfield at sites in her area. Dickson covers the

A strong second again

Black-chinned Hummingbird

Archilochus alexandri

From year to year, Black-chinned and Ruby-throated Hummingbird numbers often compete for second in abundance. This year, Black-chinneds were nearly twice as numerous as Ruby-throats, with 119 of this western species handled compared with 66 of its eastern counterpart. One site hosted seven individuals banded on a single day.

While Black-chinned Hummingbirds were rarely reported prior to the 1980's, some earlier records of Ruby-throated may in fact be of this species, as females of the two are very similar and field guides of the day did not attempt to distinguish them, on the assumption that range would suffice. One returnee this season was originally banded as an adult male in December of 2007, thus making him at least six and a half years old.

northern portion of the state when wintering hummingbirds are reported there. Johnson is training as a hummingbird bander and he assists in the area from Lafayette to Baton Rouge.

From previous years, we know that these wintering hummingbirds do not necessarily stay in the same yard or even its immediate environs all season. Nor do returning birds always seek out the same yard, though they often do, sometimes even preferring a feeder in the same location.

THE SEASON

We define the "winter season" as beginning with the arrival of the first hummingbird of a species other than Ruby-throated, usually in late July or early August, with previous first reported dates ranging from July 22 to August 6. In most years the first report is of a Rufous Hummingbird, often a returnee from a prior season, though on occasion the first arrival is a Buff-bellied. Because the season overlaps much of fall migration (and

A good year for Broad-taileds

Broad-tailed Hummingbird

Selasphorus platycercus

Never a common winter visitor, Broad-tailed Hummingbirds have in some recent years gone completely unreported, and we consider it a “good” year when there are three or four. This year proved a pleasant exception, with 11 Broad-taileds being newly banded, and with a rare treat - a home in New Orleans hosted a returnee, one of only a few records we have of this species coming back for a subsequent winter. Additionally, one home in Baton Rouge hosted not one, but two of this decidedly uncommon bird.

Broad-tailed females can often go unnoticed by the casual observer as they closely resemble their close relative, the Rufous Hummingbird. In the hand, however, the larger size of the bird and especially the much larger tail become readily apparent. The species has a distinctively more musical call than its Rufous kin - a call winter hummingbird enthusiasts should try to learn.

Left, above Louisiana's first Broad-tailed Hummingbird of the 2011-12 season (one of two at the same Baton Rouge site). Below: the characteristic long, broad retrices (tail feathers) giving the species its name.

Right, above: A young male Broad-tailed showing the first few rose-pink gorget feathers. Below: the second Broad-tailed at the Baton Rouge site.



indeed, into spring migration), we arbitrarily define any Ruby-throated Hummingbird seen after November 15 as a winter-season bird, and we include any identifiable young of the previous year in the winter tally as the first migrant Ruby-throated Hummingbirds return in the early spring. The season peaks in January and early February, when the majority of the banding takes place; however, in a good season like this, we began a heavy schedule early and kept it going into March. While our last new birds are usually banded in March, winterers are sometimes present into April and on rare occasions as late as early May.

EFFORT

Seasonal effort varies with the number of birds reported to us for possible banding; in years

when there are fewer birds reported, total hours expended and miles driven may be considerably fewer than in seasons like this. Over this winter, the various banders spent a total of 160 bander-days in the field catching and banding birds. They drove over 6,000 miles (not including separate driving by assistants) between home and the various banding sites, and visited a total of 119 different banding sites, many more than once.

In addition, scores of man-hours were spent by both banders and assistants alike in preparing for site visits: contacting homeowners, delivering “dummy” traps to acclimate the hummingbirds to the appearance of an enclosure around the feeder, and so forth. In addition, unlike larger bird bands, hummingbird bands are supplied to the banders in

Seasonal Comparisons

Season	New Birds	Return Birds	Foreign Birds	Total
2000-2001	416	32	3	451
2001-2002	482	55	2	539
2002-2003	481	53	9	543
2003-2004	510	85	7	602
2004-2005	355	111	11	477
2005-2006	301	77	7	385
2006-2007	456	57	11	524
2007-2008	319	77	7	403
2008-2009	210	63	3	276
2009-2010	231	81	4	316
2010-2011	240	74	3	317
2011-2012	815	61	7	883

Note: these numbers do not include Louisiana-banded hummingbirds reported elsewhere.



Above, right: Sammy Maniscalco, who assists in the Thibodaux area, removes Newfield’s 500th bird of the season (to be newly banded) from a trap in February. It was hard to believe that just a few months earlier, her team was just daring to hope that Louisiana might have a bigger season than the previous year.

sheets, and they must be individually cut and rolled by the bander ahead of time.

GENERAL FINDINGS

In keeping with percentages from previous years when the number of hummingbirds was high, Rufous Hummingbirds made up the bulk of the catch. In those years, Rufous accounted for nearly 66% of the total number of birds handled. This past year, that percentage had fallen to just over 33% of newly banded birds, even though a solid majority of returnees were Rufous. This year, Rufous accounted for nearly 70% of all birds handled as well as 69% of newly banded birds.

As noted in the species accounts, Black-chinned Hummingbirds were a solid second place, with 13.4% of both all birds handled and newly banded birds. We do see fluctuations in the

proportions of Black-chinned to Ruby-throated in the winter population, but in recent years the trend has been in the western species' favor. This year's 110 new birds and 119 total handled is far and away a record for a single season.

Ruby-throated numbers, by contrast, were also up, but not nearly as much, at 7.3% of birds banded and 7.5% of total birds handled.

In most years, Buff-bellied is a solid fourth-place finisher, but this year, their low numbers coupled with a surge in Calliope Hummingbirds pushed the smallest Louisiana hummer into that spot. However, at about 4% of newly banded birds, that number is not particularly significant unless those numbers continue in the years to come. With 21 new birds, Allen's Hummingbirds, usually no more than a handful, also passed up Buffies for the fifth most common species this

The tiniest of the tiny

Calliope Hummingbird

Stellula calliope

When the first wintering Calliope Hummingbird was reported in Louisiana, in 1982, barely suppressed guffaws were heard across the LSU Museum of Zoology. Even though wintering hummingbirds were already not a new phenomenon, there were no records of the species anywhere in the United States after October. It normally winters in south-central Mexico, so its appearance here was unexpected. Now it frequently is the fourth or fifth most commonly reported winter hummingbird.

This winter, too, several gardens hosted more than one Calliope, with a location in Laplace having an amazing four, another site hosting three and two more sites having two each. All together, Louisiana banders handled 35 Calliopes, making this the second-best year on record for this species of the mountain west.

Right: this second-year male Calliope is already developing the tell-tale stripes of his magenta gorget.



Big, Bad and Green

Buff-bellied Hummingbird

Amazilia yucatanensis

Buff-bellied Hummingbirds are never numerous in Louisiana in winter, though in some seasons the banders have handled as many as 60. Some houses have hosted as many as seven or eight at one time, particularly in the Jefferson Parish suburbs along the Mississippi River up from New Orleans. This year, though, only 22 were handled, and more than one-third of those were returnees. The long-term average has been about 25 new Buffies annually. Especially considering the overall resurgence of wintering hummingbirds in general, the number seems low and that is a bit troubling. Of course, the factors that drive the Buff-bellied population are very different from those that control the Rufous or Black-chinned or Calliope numbers.

Because this species must travel northeastward along the Texas coast to reach us at a time when most birds are migrating southward, we really have no idea what factors push these birds in our direction. Nonetheless, we do know that a goodly part of their range, from south Texas into Mexico, experienced considerable drought this past summer, which could well have affected the birds' ability to reproduce successfully. Decreased



numbers of blooming plants in their breeding range and along their migratory path may have prevented some from building the fat reserves needed for long-distance travel.

Particularly notable among this year's Buff-bellieds: the returning foreigner in Harahan, further mentioned on page 8. Another was last year's wanderer: banded in Baton Rouge, then after a brief sojourn in Lafayette, where her band was read photographically, she returned to the banding site. She was back again this year at the original banding location. While no site had record-setting numbers of this species, more than one garden hosted a few of these, with one yard in Harahan hosting at least five.

Above, this Buff-bellied Hummingbird graced a yard in Metairie, Louisiana for several days this winter.

winter. Particularly notable for that species were two returnees, something we don't often see in Louisiana. At number six, newly banded Buff-bellied Hummingbirds numbered 14, only three more than the usually much rarer Broad-tailed; adding in returnees, however, there were nearly twice as many Buff-bellieds handled (22) as Broad-tailed (12).

In most years, there are perhaps a few Broad-billed Hummingbirds (*Cynanthus latirostris*), but this year, despite overall record numbers, not one was reported. At least three Anna's Hummingbirds (*Calypte anna*) were documented in Louisiana, but none were banded by the team.

Hey, stranger!

Notable foreign-banded birds and foreign reports

With the growing number of hummingbird banders working across the country, and in particular with several covering other southeastern states, our banding team now regularly re-encounters “foreign” birds - hummingbirds banded at another location by another bander. There were several notable such birds this season.

Of particular note was a rare foreign returnee Buff-bellied Hummingbird. Originally banded in September 2010 along the Texas coast, this bird spent much of the winter of 2010-2011 in a garden in Harahan. In November of 2011, the bird returned to the same Louisiana garden (*see picture below*).

Four foreign-banded Rufous were recorded, three in the Baton Rouge area and one in Lafayette. Three were young birds banded in their hatch year, but after their arrival in the southeastern U.S. for the winter (one in Hamilton, Georgia; another in Atmore, Alabama; and the third in Tallahassee, Florida). Intriguingly, the fourth Rufous, caught in Baton Rouge in December, was an adult when banded in May of 2011 on Lopez Island, Washington, providing one of our few links between our wintering Rufous and their breeding range (though we do not know if this bird was a migrant or local breeding bird when banded).



The Louisiana banders also sometimes catch each other's birds, as in the case of an adult male Black-chinned captured in Baton Rouge that had been banded the previous February in Covington (*see pictures*). Additionally, a young Rufous banded in September in Lafayette was recaptured in February in Baton Rouge. Two birds banded in Louisiana, meanwhile, turned up at far distant locations. A Rufous Hummingbird banded in January of 2011 turned up in November in Wind Gap, Pennsylvania! Meanwhile, a Ruby-throated Hummingbird banded in December in Metairie, and present there until at least December 23, was captured in Tallahassee, Florida on January 11. While we have several records of wintering hummingbirds banded to the east turning up in Louisiana later in the winter, very few of our winter-banded birds has been subsequently found to the east in the same season.

Top: This Black-chinned was banded by Beall in Covington in February 2011. It spent the winter this year in Baton Rouge.

Middle: A rare returning, foreign-banded Buff-bellied Hummingbird for Louisiana, in Harahan.

Bottom: A male Ruby-throated Hummingbird banded in December in Metairie, shown on his recapture in early January in Tallahassee.



Resurgence of a Mainstay

Rufous Hummingbird

Selasphorus rufus

For years, Louisiana hummingbird banders have been worried about the decline in numbers of Rufous Hummingbirds within our winter population. At one time the overwhelming majority of winter reports were of this species, but in recent years it had declined to as low as one-third the total “catch” for the season. It’s been unclear whether the species is declining on its breeding grounds, as traditional breeding bird surveys, focused on singing birds, can easily overlook hummingbirds.

For whatever reason, this year saw a sharp up-tick in the numbers of Rufous Hummingbirds banded, rising from a historic low of 80 last season (representing 33% of newly banded hummers), to 564 this season (more than 69% of the newly banded birds). Whether it was simply a boon breeding year for the species as a whole, or in areas which supply our winter birds, or a much larger-than-usual contingent of the species redirected their winter migration in our direction, we can only speculate. One site in Baton Rouge hosted at least 23 different Rufous Hummingbirds, including 20 banded in that yard this season.

Several interesting Rufous were among the birds handled this year. As noted in the foreign re-encounter section, an adult female banded on Lopez Island,

Washington, in May of 2011 was recaptured in Baton Rouge in December. Perhaps most interesting is that this site is only about 60 miles from the site on Whidbey Island, Washington, where a Rufous banded in Metairie was later re-encountered during the breeding season. It is a tantalizing possibility

(though nothing more) that perhaps a significant portion of our wintering Rufous come from this area.

A female Rufous recaptured in Reserve, Louisiana was originally banded as an adult on

January 14, 2005. That places her hatch date at least back to the spring/summer of 2003 or earlier, making her at least 8 and a half years old; using the Bird Banding Laboratory’s standard of a June 1 hatch date, on her second recapture of the season in February, she tied the known longevity record for the species.



Other Rufous banded in 2007 and 2008 returned, including a male banded as a second year bird in January 2008. Males apparently live shorter lives, on average, than females, making this returnee at 4 years, 6 months a relatively older bird. Another Rufous was a sixth-year returnee at that location.

Above, Left: Rufous were reported from sites that had never hosted a wintering hummingbird before, including this one of seven banded at a new site in Baton Rouge. The overwhelming majority of newly banded birds were immatures, like this male.

Above, Right: This Rufous was banded at a home in Baton Rouge and moved to the Bluebonnet Nature Center a little over a mile away. He was easy to pick out as banded with his color mark, which alerted the staff to have us come confirm his identity (and band several other wintering hummingbirds).

One that got away

Sometimes, the best bird is one you never saw

In a season like this one, particularly in a busy yard, one hummingbird can go unnoticed at first among perhaps a dozen or more of its kin. Only later, in reviewing pictures, do we sometimes realize that a good bird was present and not noticed. During the Baton Rouge Audubon Winter Hummingbird Tour in January, an able photographer just learning about hummingbirds took some excellent shots at one house of several of the birds. Among them: this picture of an Anna's Hummingbird the homeowner had not seen before. Once it was identified, a concerted effort was made to stake out the bird and catch it for banding, but other than a few fleeting glimpses at a bird that might have been it, she was never seen again.



In Gratitude and Recognition

Beyond the fact that this project is a team effort among several banders, it simply could not take place without the active participation and help of scores of people. From the dozens of hummingbird hosts who opened their houses and yards to us, sometimes at the crack of dawn, often feeding us along the way, to the assistants who wrangled equipment, trapped birds, recorded data and helped us locate new banding sites, to those who financially supported the team's efforts - none of this would be possible without you.

Kevin Morgan gave 2 or more days each week to organize Baton Rouge banding trips during which he set up equipment, recorded data, and located new sites. His participation gives the Baton Rouge area more effective coverage than it otherwise might have. He has also taken over data management for Newfield. Joan Garvey also gave a couple of days each week so banding was always very efficient. Erik Johnson maintained the annual database and tally of wintering hummingbirds across the state, reporting weekly on new birds. Frank Arthur, Lynn Becnel, Sue Broussard, Paul Conover, Eric Daigre, Tim Daigre, Miriam Davey, Bill Fontenot, John Hartgerink, Hans & Angela Holbrook, Kimberly Lanka, Beth and Sammy Maniscalco, Craig, Sandra, and Megan Mineo, Mark Monroe, Rose & Jack Must [Wild Birds Unlimited, Lafayette], the Northshore Bird Club, John & Margaret Owens, Brainard Palmer-Ball, Cheryl Stanbury, Ron Stein, Melanie & Pat Stephens, Gene & Edna Street, Tom Trenchard, and Lizette Wroten all invested many hours in this project. We appreciate their special help very much.

Photo Credits

Cover: Allen's Hummingbird by Joan Garvey. Page 4: Left, above and below, Broad-tailed Hummingbird by Kevin Morgan. Right, above and below: Broad-tailed Hummingbird by Erik Johnson. Page 5: Sammy Maniscalco by Joan Garvey. Page 6: Calliope Hummingbird by Jeff Harris. Page 7: Buff-bellied Hummingbird by Joan Garvey. Page 8: Black-chinned Hummingbird by Kimberly Lanka. Buff-bellied Hummingbird by Lizette Wroten. Ruby-throated Hummingbird by Fred Dietrich. Page 9: Left, Rufous Hummingbird by Naresh Sharma. Right, Rufous Hummingbird by John Hartgerink. Page 10: Anna's Hummingbird by Kim Welsh