

Green Scene: Winter Hummingbirds

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Now that temperatures have warmed and the snow has melted, you might be tricked into thinking the winter is mostly over. You might be even more inclined to think this way if, in recent days, you glimpsed a hummingbird outside your window as some of my friends have. Well, spring is certainly on its way but this species of hummingbird has been here all winter.

The Anna's hummingbird, the only one present in the lower mainland over the winter, is a bit on the large size for a hummer. The male has a brilliant scarlet throat and crown on top of its head while the female is a fairly non-descript olive green in colour.

A male Anna's hummingbird poses with tail feathers fanned in the Shoreline Park, Port Moody. D. Schutz photo.



During winter, it is obviously no problem to distinguish them from the slighter smaller rufous hummingbirds which will not arrive until March at

the earliest. Unlike most birds, the Anna's are more likely to be found in backyards than parks because none of our native plants are blooming this time of year. Plants such as winter jasmine which provide rare winter blossoms attract these hummers to gardens. However, given the scarcity of winter blooms, the Anna's hummers that stay here year round are entirely dependent on the provision of hummingbird feeders.

Historically, the Anna's hummingbird was only found further south in places such as California. The first reports of their appearance in British Columbia date from the 1940s and 1950s. Since then, they have gradually become more common starting in the Victoria area where winters are milder and spring blossoms appear earlier. In recent years, records of their occurrence in the lower mainland have increased considerably. On the annual Christmas bird count, which occurred on December 17, a record-breaking eight Anna's hummingbirds were observed throughout the Tricities area including some in the Shoreline Park in Port Moody.

While the northerly expansion of their habitat might be thought to be due to global warming, this is not the case. The planting of winter-blooming shrubs in gardens has assisted their movement further north but the critical change has been in the provision of hummingbird feeders throughout the year. Because these hummingbirds don't undertake long migrations, they tend to start nesting early in the year. In the Victoria area, they can nest as early as January and are thought to produce a second clutch of young later in the season. Like all hummingbirds, the females are single-parent moms who typically feed and care for two young in their tiny nests. During the time they are feeding their young, the hummers will augment their diet of nectar with the addition of protein-rich insects. These hummers prefer to nest in the dense foliage of conifers, such as Douglas firs, where they will be protected from chilly winds as well as hidden from the view of potential predators.

It does seem amazing that tiny hummingbirds, with their energy-demanding ability to hover over flowers, can survive our cold winters. However, hummingbirds evolved on the slopes on the Andes in South America where they developed a technique to get them through frigid nights. They are able to conserve energy by dropping their body temperature overnight into a temporary state of hibernation called torpor. Although their normal temperature is 40 degrees Centigrade, a torpid hummer can reduce its temperature to 10 degrees. Their heart beat slows from 500 beats per minute to as low as 50 and breathing can even stop which allows them to save considerably energy. Arousing from torpor takes about half an hour. The bird will shiver and vibrate its wings to generate body heat. People sometimes find what appears to be a dead hummingbird in their garden or plant pots but these are usually only torpid birds waiting for the weather to warm.

If you have a sunny, protected corner in your yard, you may be able to attract an Anna's hummingbird. Once you make the decision to feed them, you should commit to continue filling your feeder throughout the winter with an extra-rich blend of 3 cups of water to 1 cup of sugar. It is a good idea to bring a feeder indoors when temperatures drop below freezing at night. However, be aware that hummers like to feed early in the morning so you should try to place your feeder outdoors as early as possible in the morning. It's delightful to see these gorgeous birds becoming more prevalent and we should all be grateful for the dedicated people who are helping to assure their survival throughout the winter.