

Urban Wildlife Issues
Wildlife Rescue column by Devin Manky
as appearing in the **Burnaby NOW** newspaper July 14, 2007

Tiny jewels of nature

As I write this column, I hear a slight buzzing outside my office window. A male rufous hummingbird has arrived to drink at our feeder.

Of course, I have to stop and marvel at his beauty as he hovers in front of me. Hummingbirds have been described as "tiny jewels" of nature, and indeed this jewel-like quality is never more apparent than when the sun sparkles off the bird's iridescent throat feathers.

Yes, there is a definite calming joy one experiences when observing hummingbirds.

Hummingbirds are unique to the Americas and have been noted as long as humans have been recording history.

Hummingbirds have a prominent place in Native American mythology. Perhaps my favourite is the Aztec belief that every warrior slain in battle is reborn as a hummingbird.

These reincarnated warriors spend their afterlife sipping the sweet nectar of paradise while every once in awhile they sharpen their skills in battle by confronting one another as the sun gleams off their resplendent armor.

Legends such as these make us feel as if hummingbirds will be around for ages to come.

Yet, sadly, like many other wild species, hummingbirds are being impacted by human development and the shifting global climate.

Twenty-eight hummingbird species are threatened or endangered, but none yet in the U.S.A. or Canada. Until recently, however, no group had consistently monitored hummingbird numbers in North America. A long term and well-defined research program was needed to determine population trends.



In 2002, Dr. Susan Wethington, George West and Barbara Carlson founded the Hummingbird Monitoring Network in Arizona. Soon after, the project expanded to include all of the West Coast of North America from California to Alaska. All species of hummingbirds were included, but the primary focus became the rufous hummingbird, which, as it turns out, is the most prominent hummingbird in British Columbia.

The rufous has the longest migration of any hummingbird species, migrating from B.C. and Alaska down to southern Mexico and back each year. Indeed, if you compared the rufous hummingbird's body length to distance travelled, it has the longest migration of any bird species! Not bad for a bird that weighs less than five grams.

Since British Columbia is the primary breeding grounds for the rufous hummingbird in North America, a series of banding and monitoring stations were set up throughout the province. Cam Finlay, a master bird bander on Vancouver Island, established the first monitoring sites near Victoria. He then put out a call that others were needed and I was quick to answer his summons!

I became involved in the Hummingbird Monitoring Network in the spring of 2005 when I began training with Cam. Since then I have monitored and banded hundreds of hummingbirds at different locations around the Lower Mainland, and also established a permanent monitoring station at the top of Grouse Mountain – where we have even seen hummingbirds present in spring snow storms!

A question I'm usually asked by members of the public is, "How does one go about capturing a hummingbird in order to band it?" I answer, "Carefully!"

We have a specialized trap system that prevents a bird from leaving the area around a feeder. Trained handlers reach in and extract the bird and place it in a hummingbird "straightjacket" – a soft flannel restraining device that prevents the bird from injuring its wings. The bander then quickly takes measurements and places a very tiny bird band on the bird's right leg. Finally, the hummingbird is given a good feed on sugar water and released to continue its journey.

The whole banding process is completed in less than four minutes in order to minimize stress to the animal.

Data is already revealing a potentially problematic trend in B.C. Each year fewer birds are observed. Is this a natural trend because they are using different migration routes in successive years, or are fewer birds surviving because of human disturbances to their habitat? Only continued monitoring and study will answer these questions.

Projects like the Hummingbird Monitoring Network are vital because they help us understand the species' diversity, abundance and survivorship in a variety of habitats. If we know ahead of time that certain populations are in trouble, then we can begin looking at ways to preserve critical habitat. In the words of the Hummingbird Monitoring Network, we should strive to "protect the joy" before it is too late.