

Anna's Hummingbird: Moving north, to our delight

Hummingbirds are amazing.

Everyone I know seems happy when they see one of these tiny birds hovering next to a fresh flower blossom.

Their fast wing-beats and quick motions easily catch our eyes as we watch them move around and listen to the hum of their wings.

Globally, there are 361 hummingbird species.

Four species of hummingbird visit central Washington: Anna's, Calliope, Black-chinned and Rufous.

The Anna's is the only one of the four that has established year-round residency in central Washington. The other three species migrate south for the winter and return in April or May.

All four of the hummingbird species that visit eastern Washington weigh in at 0.1-0.2 ounces (2-5g) which is about the weight of a penny.

Bees and insects are not the only important pollinators. As hummingbirds dive into a blossom to gather nectar for themselves, they pick up pollen on their beaks and heads, which gets transferred to the next blossom or plant.

The Anna's Hummingbird range is gradually expanding to the north. In the 1930s, Anna's were found only south of the San Francisco Bay area. They reached the Oregon border in



Bruce McCammon is retired, color-blind and enjoys photographing the birds in north central Washington.



Hungry babies reach up for food from a momma Anna's Hummingbird.

1944 and were documented in Seattle in 1964.

It is believed that an increase in yard plantings, especially of native species, and an increased use of hummingbird feeders has led to this northward expansion.

Today we frequently hear about wildlife and avian populations that are in trouble ecologically due to habitat loss and fragmentation. The little Anna's Hummingbird gives us a reason to celebrate a small success.

While the expansion of the Anna's range is not entirely the result of natural forces, they are here and considered year-round residents. Hooray!

The first documentation of Anna's Hummingbird nesting in central Washington occurred in 2021. A nest was found on private property in Wenatchee and I was allowed to access the area to document the nest construction, incubation period, hatching and raising of the young, and, eventually, the fledging of the nestlings.

My first observation of the nest was on March 3, 2021 and the nest was empty on April 14 –

43 days later.

During that time the nest and the birds experienced 30 mile per hour winds, temperatures as low as 27 degrees F, and three inches of snow.

The high winds and snow were particularly concerning but the birds proved to be able to withstand whatever got thrown at them.

Female hummingbirds do all the work to build the nest, incubate the eggs, and protect and feed the young.

As is usually the case, this mother Anna's hatched two young about March 23. I was able to watch their growth as the mother made repeated trips to the nest to feed the babies a mixture of nectar and insects.

The feeding process is remarkably unnerving. The kids raise their heads up when the mother arrives. She sticks her long beak into an open mouth and pushes the food mixture into the kids with a sewing machine action. It looks like it has to be damaging to the babies as she thrusts her beak into each throat. Yikes!

But the process works and the

nestlings grow at a fast pace. Feathers appear and the mother quits occupying the nest, returning only to the edge of the nest to feed.

The nest, made of plant down and, in this case, cotton, is held together by careful application of spider webs. The design allows the nest to flex as the nestlings grow.

Soon, the babies are crowding the nest and begin to practice using their wings with stationary "flying."

They become attentive to sounds and sights. Their beaks have grown into an almost-full hummingbird length. The time

between feedings lengthens as the mother subtly encourages the nestlings to prepare to be on their own.

And then they are gone.

I had become so accustomed to seeing the birds in the nest that my visit on April 14 was rather upsetting.

I knew, of course, that this was the way it would be, but I was left wanting more. I am disappointed I did not get to see the kids take flight for the first time.

As I review all the movies that I made between March 3 and April 14, I relive the process and know that I have learned a great deal about these amazing birds. I understand how fortunate I am to have been given access to the nest.

My plan is to prepare a video showing the nest from start to finish. When complete, the video will be hosted on the North Central Washington Audubon Society website (www.ncwaudubon.org).

I hope that you are able to watch the video and come to appreciate these tiny birds as much as I do.