

Western Canada Hummingbird Banding Summary - 2011

When I first started my Ruby-throated Hummingbird research project in western Canada, my objective was to learn more about this species at the northern and western limits of its range. Were they different from their more southern counterparts? Did they show the same site fidelity and return to the same homes every summer? As time went on, another question presented itself: just how far north and how far west do Ruby-throated Hummingbirds breed?

Most people believed central Alberta, around Edmonton, was the limit of their summer range. But after banding Rubythroats in Manitoba and Saskatchewan during the summer of 2010, I began to suspect Rubythroats could also be found as far west as northeastern British Columbia. The type of habitat that Rubythroats like in the North (open forests of trembling aspen and white spruce) spills over from Alberta into the northeastern corner of British Columbia, and extends all the way to the foothills of the Canadian Rockies. Do Rubythroats follow this habitat?

With a grant from the Baillie Fund of Bird Studies Canada, a nonprofit organization, paying some of my expenses, I took off this summer to find out. My first stop, however, was in Manitoba, at two locations where I banded during July and August of 2010. This year, at the home of Karen Podolchuk and Allan Daman in the town of Falcon Lake near the Ontario border, I recaptured 5 Ruby-throated Hummingbirds (3 males and 2 females) that I banded the previous summer. Included was a male that had been a juvenile, not long out of the nest, when I banded him in August 2010. My next stop was at the A Rocha Prairie Canada Field Study Centre in the Pembina Valley between Morden, MB and the North Dakota line. There, I recaptured 4 females that I had banded in mid-July 2010. Because I had banded a total of 13 Ruby-throated females at this location last summer, this means 30% of them returned, or almost 1 in 3. This is a good return rate for a migratory species, especially one with a perilous migration from Canada to Mexico and Central America and back again.

My next banding stop was Dawson Creek, British Columbia, which is famous for being "Mile 0" of the Alaska Highway. It is further west than Spokane, Washington, and is roughly the same latitude as Ketchikan, Alaska. During 10 days in northeastern BC, I banded 64 hummingbirds at 15 homes: 53 Calliope, 10 Ruby-throated, and 1 Rufous Hummingbird. The area from the small village of Tupper (right on the Alberta/British Columbia) north and west to Dawson Creek, Fort St. John, and Charlie Lake, British Columbia, is one of the few places in the world (perhaps the only place) where Ruby-throated and Calliope Hummingbirds can be found together during breeding season. The 10 Ruby-throated Hummingbirds (3 males and 7 females) that I banded were the westernmost breeding Ruby-throated ever documented. After leaving British Columbia, I also banded 10 Ruby-throated Hummingbirds in northern Alberta, in the towns of North Star, Kinuso, Canyon Creek, and Slave Lake. The female hummingbird that I banded in North Star, Alberta, just south of Manning, is the farthest north that a Rubythroat has been banded.

Next summer, I plan to spend five weeks in northeastern British Columbia. Besides banding in the Dawson Creek/Fort St. John/Chetwynd area, I also hope to travel up the Alaska Highway to Pink Mountain and Fort Nelson, BC, to see how far north Ruby-throated (and Calliope) Hummingbirds breed.