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Second Record of Calliope Hummingbird in North Carolina

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In late February 1997, Scott observed an unfamiliar hummingbird at her feeders near Hampstead in Pender County, North Carolina. She noted that it was noticeably smaller than a probable Rufous Hummingbird (*Selasphorus rufus*) that was also visiting her hummingbird feeders. On 24 February, Derb Carter paid a visit to Scott's feeders and was able to study the small hummingbird. He identified it as a Calliope Hummingbird (*Stellula calliope*), the second report of this Western species for North Carolina. The first report was of an immature male photographed at New Bern in late October 1995 (Thompson *et al.* 1997).

Many birders traveled to Hampstead over the next two weeks to look at the hummingbird, presumably a female, and to corroborate Carter's identification. Because Calliope Hummingbird is extremely rare in the Eastern United States, and because female hummingbirds are notoriously difficult to identify,

considerable study of the bird was undertaken. LeGrand observed the hummingbird with John Fussell, Will Cook, and Jeff Pippen on 25 February. During this visit, the hummingbird was not only seen within 25 feet through the kitchen window but was also in the front yard from a distance of 50 feet, where the bird perched in the open in shrubs near the feeder. In fact, the observation in the front yard was more revealing of the true plumage colors because the angle of light and the red coloration of the feeder imparted misleading colors on the bird.

When seen at the feeder, the bird was clearly tiny to small, although no other birds were available for size comparison. The bill was medium length for a hummingbird and was slightly longer than the head; it was all black, very thin, and very slightly decurved. The head appeared large, perhaps because the tail was quite short and covered by the wings at rest. The tail appeared to be folded into a wedge or point when the bird was perched. The tail was dark green with white corners; no rufous color was visible in the tail. The back coloration was unusual for a hummingbird, as it was a bright emerald or grass green, perhaps with a slight bluish tint; most other hummingbirds have a dark green or a golden-green color on the back. The wings were dark, with the folded primaries being pale black.

The throat was white with faint, broken gray-brown spots; the spots were larger and browner near the cheeks. The middle of the underparts was white from the throat to the belly. The sides of the upper breast, flanks, and vent were a light buffy-rust color, and this color was more noticeable when the feathers were fluffed. The head was mostly greenish, with slightly darker lores. The forehead was brownish- to grayish-green. There was a faint, whitish line running behind the eye and curving down the side of the neck. The cheek was flecked with gray-brown.

LeGrand heard the bird call on several occasions. The calls were a high and soft smacking or twittering, somewhat like a call of the Dark-eyed Junco (*Junco hyemalis*).

LeGrand, Fussell, Cook, and Pippen carefully reviewed several field guides, both those with color paintings (e.g., National Geographic Society 1983) and those with color photographs (Farrand 1983, Udvardy and Farrand 1994; Stokes and Stokes 1996). Costa's Hummingbird (*Calypte costae*) was perhaps the leading identification candidate, because of its small size. This species lacks buff-colored flanks, however, and the female has an unstreaked white throat. Anna's Hummingbird (*C. anna*) is a much larger bird than Calliope and seldom if ever shows buffy or rufous flanks. The soft rufous color in the flanks and vent are sometimes seen in *Archilochus* hummingbirds – [Ruby-throated (*A. colubris*) and Black-chinned (*A. alexandri*) hummingbirds]. However, these hummingbirds are also larger with more obvious tails and do not normally show an emerald green or grass green back color. *Selasphorus* hummingbirds – Rufous, Allen's (*S. sasin*), and Broad-tailed (*S. platycercus*) – have extensive rufous coloration on the flanks, and they have noticeable

rufous coloration on the base of the tail feathers. Broad-tailed Hummingbird often shows a pale rufous color on the flanks and little rufous in the tail, but it is a moderately large hummingbird with a fairly ample tail that is not short.

Most observers agreed with the initial identification of the hummingbird as Calliope, but some were not certain as to its identity, believing that the bill was too long for Calliope. This idea of a "short bill" for female Calliope was based mainly on the text and painting in the National Geographic Society (1983) guide. However, the photos of female Calliope in Udvardy and Farrand (1994) and Stokes and Stokes (1996) show a bill of seemingly medium length and not drawing attention for being short or long. Male Calliopes do have noticeably short bills, based on photos in these latter two references and in Farrand (1983).

The North Carolina Bird Records Committee (1998) accepted this record, using notes provided by Pippen, LeGrand, and Jack Peachey (during a visit on 4 March). Although photos of the bird were taken, several Committee members felt that the photos, taken while the bird was at a feeder, were misrepresentative (e.g., a buffy color to the breast was imparted by reflections of the red feeder, and the iridescent color of the back feathers was not visible because of the light angle). Thus, photos were not used in the voting. Fortunately, the bird seen at New Bern in 1995 was an immature male with a single, elongate, and iridescent magenta-colored gorget feather that clearly shows in photographs reviewed by the Committee (LeGrand, pers. obs.).

The description of this bird was sent to an outside expert in hummingbird identification. The reviewer indicated that "Some of the characteristics given for this bird are not good for Calliope. If I were on a records committee, I doubt I would have passed [the report]." Another expert reviewed the photograph mentioned above and suggested to LeGrand, Pippen, and Cook that the bird might have been a *Selasphorus* species. LeGrand has seen this photograph, and the red reflections off the feeder impart a pale red or pink shade to the entire underparts of the bird, giving LeGrand the misleading impression that the bird in the photograph might be a *Selasphorus* species. After these two negative outside reviews came back, Will Cook, North Carolina General Field Notes Editor of the *Chat*, posted photos of the hummingbird at the feeder, along with a description of the bird, on a website and asked for additional comments from birders familiar with hummingbirds. The responses were evenly split between Calliope and Rufous/Allen's. Negative comments mentioned that the tail appeared to extend beyond the wingtips, the bill looked somewhat long, and throat feathering that did not appear correct for Calliope. Others noted, however, that the wings appeared to be longer than the tail and the bill looked short and straight, without the droop at the tip that *Selasphorus* hummingbirds usually have. Another reviewer commented that the bird in the photo did not appear to have a pale spot just in front of the eye that breaks up the dark eyeline, a mark often visible on typical female Calliopes.

Cook has the same model of feeder at his house as was present in the photos. Using two photos of the bird at the feeder, and carefully measuring enlargements of the slides, he estimated that the exposed culmen length is 16.2 mm and the total length of the bird is 82 mm. According to Pyle (1997), the normal exposed culmen length of a female Calliope ranges from 14.3 - 16.5 mm, whereas in a female Rufous it ranges from 16.4 - 19.0. Thus, the bird's bill falls within the range of the Calliope, though near the upper end, and falls slightly below that of a normal Rufous.

Despite these many non-supportive outside reviews, it should be understood that none of these reviewers who believe the bird to be a *Selasphorus* hummingbird observed the Hampstead bird. In particular, it can be difficult for a photo and a description of a female hummingbird to corroborate a sighting. Different observers likely would describe the length or curvature of the bill, the degree of buff color on the flanks, and the shade of green on the back, for example, in different ways. These differences could be due to observer distance from the bird, amount and angle of sunlight on the bird, or intensity of reflected tints on the bird from the red color of the feeder. Size of a bird is usually difficult to determine from a photograph, as well. The senior author believes that the overwhelming agreement by dozens of persons who observed the bird that it was, indeed, a Calliope Hummingbird, plus the acceptance by the Records Committee as a Calliope, should outweigh concerns about the identification by persons who did not actually see the Hampstead hummingbird.

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