

General Field Notes

General Field Notes briefly report such items as rare sightings, unusual behaviors, significant nesting records, or summaries of such items.

First, second, or third sightings of species in either state must be submitted to the appropriate Bird Records Committee prior to publication in *The Chat*.

Second Record of a Black-chinned Hummingbird (*Archilochus alexandri*) for North Carolina

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In early February 1997 the authors visited the home of the Madeiros family in Raleigh, Wake County, NC to investigate the identity of a female or juvenile male hummingbird whose occurrence had been brought to our attention by John Connors. Mrs. Madeiros had attended one of John's public programs the week before and informed him that a hummingbird had been regularly using a feeder in her yard for months. She had assumed it to be a Ruby-throated Hummingbird (*Archilochus colubris*). Gerwin visited on February 6th and Campbell on the morning of the 8th. The bird's bill size and lack of any orange-buff on the flanks or rufous on any tail feathers eliminated possible candidates other than *Archilochus*. We concluded it was indeed an *Archilochus*, but both felt the bird had most of the characteristics of a Black-chinned Hummingbird (*Archilochus alexandri*). Gerwin returned on the 8th to take photos, and Campbell on the 10th to make sound recordings of the bird's vocalizations. These slides and audio tape are on file in the Bird Collection at the North Carolina State Museum (NCSM Photo 579, Audio 1, respectively). Bob and Martha Sargent reviewed this material and agreed that the bird was a female Black-chinned Hummingbird.

The most obvious clue to this bird's identity was its behavior. It was constantly and vigorously spreading and pumping its tail while hovering at the feeder. The hummingbird often continued to flick its tail while perched, though not as rapidly as when hovering. Such persistent pumping is characteristic of Black-chinned Hummingbirds. Although Ruby-throated Hummingbirds occasionally flick or pump their tail, it is not a consistent behavior. The Sargents reported to us that they have never observed a Black-chinned hovering for more than a few seconds without displaying this vigorous and rapid tail pumping. This hummingbird was also very vocal at the feeder but this behavior may have been influenced by our presence. It did

not hesitate to feed with a human observer close by and would chatter a lot between drinks. The vocalizations were a one- or two-syllable “tick” call similar to that of a Ruby-throat but somewhat softer in tone.

Fortunately the hummingbird did spend a good deal of time perched near the top of a Flowering Dogwood tree (*Cornus florida*) directly out (at eye level) from the elevated deck where the feeder was hung. It spent most of its time waiting for winged insects that it could “flycatch” from its high, open perch. Therefore we were able to clearly and leisurely observe and note its physical characteristics with binoculars.

This bird would also perch while feeding, and from these views we were able to easily determine that its folded wings were about as long as its tail. In contrast, a Ruby-throated Hummingbird’s tail extends well beyond the wing tips. Also, whereas a Ruby-throated has primaries that are pointed at the tips from the outer webbing on the feathers being significantly narrower than the inner webbing, the outer primaries on this bird had webbing which was more symmetrical, thus producing a wing tip that looked rounded. These two field marks, wing to tail length and outer primary shape, together are considered the most reliable field marks that distinguish Black-chinned from Ruby-throated Hummingbirds (Sargent and Sargent 1999).



Figure 1. Perched bird showing relative wing to tail length and outer primary shape. Note the recently molted (darker) inner primary wing feathers. Photo by John Gerwin.

The bird’s bill was noticeably long but virtually straight. According to Bob Sargent (pers. comm.), not all Black-chinned Hummingbirds have bills that appear slightly curved. Likewise, Ruby-throated Hummingbirds can have curved bills as well. Therefore bill shape is not a dependable field mark for separating the species unless combined with other characteristics typical of Ruby-throated or Black-chinned Hummingbirds.

The color of the dorsal surface of the bird was a different shade of green from that of either an immature or adult Ruby-throated. It was a dull, washed-out color. Scattered iridescent feathering extended into the bird’s shoulders but not beyond. The nape was a grayish green, completely lacking in iridescence. The crown and forehead were a dull gray-brown and of a

different shape than that of a Ruby-throat. The head looked “flattened” and this effect was further accentuated by the low angle at which the bill intersected the face. These characteristics are all consistent with the identification of a female Black-chinned Hummingbird (Pyle 1997). In addition, the shafts of the primaries and secondaries, which were visible on the drooped wing at rest, had a rufous cast. This coloration is typical of older worn feathers. A young bird would have much darker flight feathers, giving us some indication that this was probably an adult female.

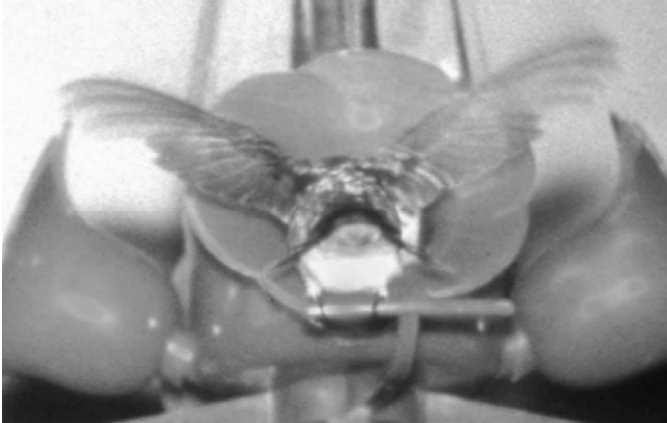


Figure 2. Black-chinned Hummingbird. With the wings spread, the characteristic rounded outer primaries are visible. Photo by John Gerwin.

We also noticed that the ventral surface of the hummingbird was markedly different from that of a female Ruby-throated. The belly was a dingy shade of white and the chest was even darker gray-white. The bird also exhibited small white tufts or “snowballs” from its flanks between the trailing edge of its wings and back as it perched with wings slightly drooped, as is typical for a Black-chinned (Sargent and Sargent 1999).

This note provides details for the second confirmed record of Black-chinned Hummingbird in North Carolina. This record was one of three accepted by the North Carolina Bird Records Committee (LeGrand et al. 2002) in 2001. There have been a number of reports of Black-chinned Hummingbirds in recent years, but the species has been a challenge to document. In November of 1994 Derb Carter observed an immature male in New Hanover County (LeGrand et al. 1997), the first documented record. The field identification of any out-of-range (or out-of-season) *Archilochus* is difficult. Indeed, Kaufman (1990) concludes: “For all practical purposes, the Ruby-throated Hummingbird is identical to the Black-chinned except in adult male plumage. There are some slight differences that may help the observer to detect the possible presence of either species out of range, but such identifications can be no more than tentative unless the birds are mist-netted for examination in the hand.” We only add that decent photos and/or sound recordings can also be conclusive.

Literature Cited

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