



Flash

Spiraling maneuvers, fierce screeches, twitters—dominance on display

BY NICK JANS



Klehini Valley,
Haines

For the season, a rufous hummingbird called Flash dominates the flowerbeds and feeders around Nick's home.

SIT ON THE BACK STEPS, COFFEE IN hand, soaking in the morning peace of our Klehini Valley homestead, 27 miles north of Haines. On this spring day, the tap-tap of a sapsucker drumming mingles with the rustle of cottonwood leaves; a half mile downhill, the white noise of the river echoes off the mountains. My reverie explodes in a reddish blur that almost parts my hair, and a shrill, emphatic *chee-dee-deeeee!* I'm staring into a pair of tiny, glaring eyes, hovering in space, an arm's length away. Just as abruptly, the apparition vanishes, gone in an aerobatic backward roll and a whirl of wings I can scarcely track.

I've just been served notice by Flash—the male rufous hummingbird who's laid claim to the three nectar feeders I'd hung off the back porch. No matter that there's

enough food for dozens of birds; it's all his, and he fearlessly confronts all comers, me included—though he weighs less than the tip of my little finger. From any of several nearby perches, he peers down, guarding his treasure, flashing his gorget (an iridescent, orange-red throat patch) like a laser to advertise his presence. That, or a sudden, diving attack from above is usually enough to rout any interloper; but every now and then, there's a prolonged fight, complete with spiraling maneuvers, fierce little screeches, twitters, and chips. Less dominant birds are often forced out of the air. There are roughly a dozen other hummingbirds in the area that try to sneak in to feed, including one other bright male, several females, and a handful of immature birds, each identifiable by their plumage.



Flash (left) perches for refreshment and will challenge any living being that approaches his feeders, even the drab females (right) of his species.

They succeed just often enough to keep trying; often one or two birds slip in while Flash is busy chasing another. To give others more of a chance, I've placed feeders on the other side of the house. Though he tries, Flash can't be everywhere at once. Still, the air about my place is abuzz with the racket of wrangling hummingbirds from dawn through twilight—17 hours or more.

When you think of ferocious Alaska wildlife, grizzlies, moose, and wolves come to mind. Uh, hummingbirds? In fact, many folks are surprised to discover these subtropical, delicate-seeming creatures at home in the Great Land. Nonetheless, southeast coastal Alaska hosts three migrant hummingbird species: rufous, Anna's, and Costa's. The latter two are occasional sightings. The rufous, on the other hand, is as much a part of the rain forest ambiance as glaciers and pink salmon. Find a bright patch of fireweed or other bright blooms (including planted gardens), and chances are you'll find rufous hummingbirds buzzing about. While they draw quick energy from flowers and feeders, they also depend on protein from the seasonal abundance of insects, including aphids, mosquitoes, gnats, and spiders.

Pound for pound (in fact, a full-grown rufous tips the scales at less than a fifth of an ounce), there is no feistier, tougher bird in all Alaska, and perhaps the world. Though among one of the world's smaller hummingbird species, rufous are recognized as the most skilled fliers and the most aggressive. Not only will they successfully drive off hummingbird

species twice their size; they'll attack pretty much any creature, including bears and humans, that gets too close to a staked-out food source. Their arsenal includes an array of sharp chips and buzzes, accompanied by (at least, from their point of view) fearsome displays. The chestnut-colored, brilliant-throated mature males such as Flash stake out the richest spots; the slightly larger, emerald-backed, less aggressive females take whatever's left. Even though the male has a vital genetic interest in attracting and mating with as many females as possible, he still rousts them from his food source. Rather than buying their affection, as one might expect, Flash relies on dazzling prospective mates with stylized dives, gorget flashes, and hovering displays. Apparently, the girls are attracted to the bling and energy he can afford to expend, shaking his tail feathers.

Once mated—within a week of arriving at their Alaska breeding grounds—the females are totally on their own. They lay a tiny pair of eggs in an inch-wide, cup-shaped nest that's woven from soft plant down and spider web silk, and camouflaged with bark and moss. The helpless, insect-sized young hatch in under three weeks, grow rapidly, and are flying just three weeks later—though they still depend a while longer on mom to feed them a regurgitated mix of small insects and plant nectar. The bright but short Alaska summer affords no time to waste. These young, inexperienced birds are just weeks away from an epic journey.

Alaska's rufous hummingbirds travel 2 to nearly 4 thousand linear miles each

spring between their core wintering grounds in the mountains of Mexico and their breeding territory, which extends throughout the Southeast Panhandle and as far north as Anchorage. By late July to mid-August they head southward again. Relative to their body size (3½ inches long, and less than a fifth of an ounce) one ornithologist figured this is the longest migration of any bird on the planet. It's such an improbable journey that one folktale claims hummingbirds migrate on the backs of geese. In fact, however, each tiny bird seems to travel alone and follows a detailed inner map that leads, for most of the species, down through the Rocky Mountains from one food source to another—each one vital for replenishing a body that has virtually no fat reserves and hardly any mass. Exact timing and food availability is obviously critical and raises the question of the species's vulnerability to climate change.

It's one thing for experienced, older birds to navigate, finding specific patches of flowers or feeders throughout all this distance, as research and birder reports confirm. But how do young birds, barely two months old, find their way? Perhaps they do tag along behind others, though there is no documentation of this behavior.

Miracles sometimes come in tiny packages. Next time a rufous hummingbird whirs past, in all its fierce, feather-jeweled finery, take a good look—just don't get too close. 🐦

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