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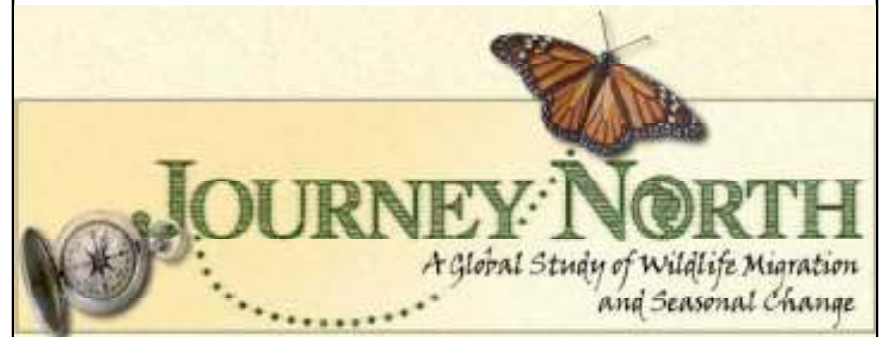


Photo © Ed Robertson

Make Way for Nesting: A Tale of Territories, Thieves, and Courtship

by Eve Pranis

Imagine you're a male hummingbird making your Journey North to your breeding grounds. Your instincts urge you to do one thing: set up a territory! What would you look for? How would you behave?



Photo © Chris Wormwell

Researchers who band birds have proven that hummingbirds often return to the same areas — and even the same feeders — year after year.

You arrive in the breeding grounds before females do. Your instinct is to find a territory with lots of nectar-rich flowers and trees or shrubs for protection. You also want perches so you can watch for intruders. It might be a forest, edge of a woodland, orchard, or even somebody's garden! It could as big as half a football field.



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The better the nectar sources on your territory, the more likely a female hummer, like this one, will choose you as a mate.

But if food resources are good, your territory might be much smaller. In fact, you might allow another male to set up a territory as close as 50 feet away. But watch out . . .



Photo © Peat W. Hammond

Food matters! Here a female Rubythroat laps up nectar tucked deep within an iris.

You fiercely chase off any intruder — male or female — that steps over the boundary. You might even claim a feeder as your territory and spend much of the day perched nearby. If a rival hummer, other bird, or even a bee comes calling, you put on a frenzied fight to guard your food source.



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An adult male tells a younger male to buzz off!

Many birds use their song and bright plumage to declare the borders of their territories. *Your* tiny twittery voice doesn't carry far enough to warn off intruders. But your special wing bones and muscles help you put on dazzling displays to warn competitors to stay away!



Hummers need to feed every 10 to 15 minutes, or they could starve. So both males and females vigorously protect nectar sources!

Scientists have discovered that Rufous hummers are — by nature — very clever. The perimeter (edge) of territories is hard to defend. So if you were a Rufie, you would drain the nectar from the flowers at the edge of your territory each morning. Flying thieves would find nothing left!



As this Rufous hummer drains nectar in the morning, he also builds his strength for defending his territory.

Then in the middle of the day, you'd feed in the center of your territory. And there's more! Scientists found that Rufous hummers know just how many flowers they need to survive. Researchers hid some flowers in a hummer's territory by putting a blanket over them. In response, the bird expanded the borders to make up for the lost flowers!



Photo © Ed Robertson

What do you think this Rufous hummer is doing — or about to do?

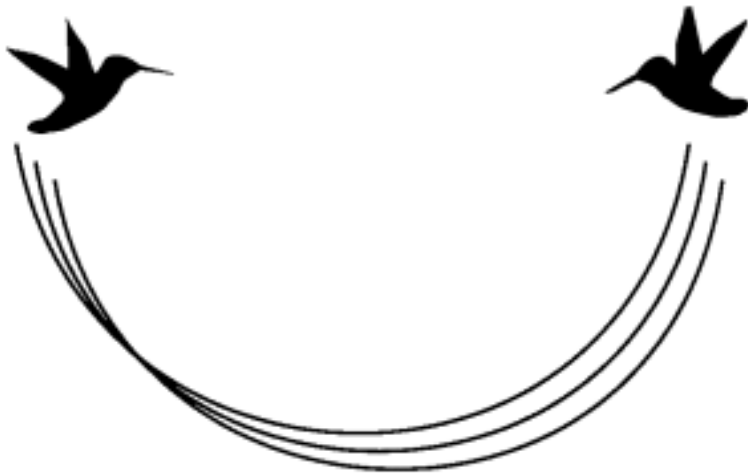
When females return and fly into your territory, you show off your bright red gorget (throat feathers) — or orange one if you're a Rufous. But that's just the beginning. You also show off some amazing acrobatic skills!



Photo © Dr. Hays Cummins

The gorget only glistens if light hits it — and bounces off — at a certain angle. Otherwise, it looks dark.

You fly up nearly 50 feet in the air near a female hummer. You face the sun so your brilliant gorget glistens. Then you suddenly dive at 40 miles per hour right toward her. You pull up again and make a perfect u-shaped pattern. You make only squeaky notes, but an amazing sound comes from your wings beating up to 200 times per minute as you dive.



*Keep your eyes and ears peeled this spring.
Can you catch a hummer doing this?*

If your territory has lots of good nectar sources and your display is energetic enough, the female might select you as a mate. Exhausted from your manic mission, you soon leave to find a new territory. The female will do *all* the important work of building a nest and raising young. How? Read all about it in the booklet, "Building a Hummingbird Nest: Strong, Soft, and Stretchy."



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