

A MASSACHUSETTS FIRST: ALLEN'S HUMMINGBIRD ON NANTUCKET

by Alan Bennett

The 1988 fall migration on Nantucket started with a very special bird: an Allen's Hummingbird appeared at Edith Andrews' banding station on August 26. This is the first record of *Selasphorus sasin* in Massachusetts and the first record for this species in eastern North America away from the Gulf Coast.

Reports of *Selasphorus* hummingbirds east of the Mississippi River are unusual. Previously, there had been only two records of hummingbirds in Massachusetts identified as *Selasphorus* species. One was a bird present in the Newton garden of Allison McGowan, April 15-17, 1978. After careful study of the documenting photos, it was reported as "almost certainly a Rufous Hummingbird—a first state record" (*American Birds* 32: 1139). The other *Selasphorus* was an indeterminate species that was present at a feeder at Wellfleet Bay Wildlife Sanctuary, August 27-29, 1986. Of all western hummingbirds, the Rufous Hummingbird (*S. rufus*) is apparently the most likely to visit or overwinter in the East and has been recorded at various seasons from Nova Scotia to Florida. See "Rufous Hummingbirds in eastern North America" by A. E. Conway and S. R. Drennan, *American Birds* 33: 130-32, 1979.

In the United States, Allen's Hummingbird occurs primarily in coastal California, and it is rarely reported east of the Rockies. The migrating race of this species (*S. sasin sasin*) ranges from southwestern Oregon to south-central Mexico. There are several records from Arizona, Texas, and Louisiana, but the farthest east Allen's has previously been recorded is Reserve, Louisiana (*The A.O.U. Check-List*, sixth edition, 1983).

A noted fall migrant trap, the Mothball Pines are on the southeast end of Hummock Pond in the Cisco section of Nantucket. Every fall, Edith Andrews operates a banding station in these woods, and I was fortunate to work as Edith's assistant for the 1988 season. The fall migration was good. The week of September 11-17 was very busy: 534 birds were banded. On the twelfth alone, 183 birds were banded, an average of one bird every four minutes! Warblers, vireos, and flycatchers were everywhere. The bayberries were so full of birds that the bushes seemed to move as if swaying in the wind. Larry Jodrey, a longtime Nantucket observer, summed it up: "It's like the old days."

The most unusual event came during the first week of banding. On August 26, about 11:55 A.M., I was concentrating on taking a Common Yellowthroat out of a mist net next to Hummock Pond. Off to the side, I caught a glimpse of a small reddish orange bird as it flew within a few feet of me. I had just heard some House Finches fly overhead, so I did not bother to look at it, assuming

from the color that the bird was a male finch. A moment later, however, a sudden zigzag movement caught my attention, and this time I looked up. The bird flying near me was not a finch, but a hummingbird. Then, when about twenty feet away, it turned and came toward me again. It was flying low among evening primroses, zigzagging from flower to flower, hovering at each blossom. The bird's underparts appeared to shimmer an orange rufous color in the full sun, and its back sparkled a bright chartreuse. I was startled by the bird's strangeness and brilliance. This was clearly not a Ruby-throated Hummingbird, and I had left my binoculars behind while tending the nets!

After a few moments, the bird took off toward the pond and flew into a net. Once in the net, all its shine and color seemed to disappear. Leaving the yellowthroat behind, I quickly ran to the hummingbird. Its wings were whirring; so I cupped my hands around it to quiet it and called Edith for help. When she arrived, I said I had a very good bird, a new species for me and perhaps for her. When I opened one of my hands, Edith was astonished.

The only hummingbird we were familiar with was the Ruby-throated, and even these rarely stray into Edith's nets. We were both very excited because we thought it was a Rufous Hummingbird. As we worked to release it, the hummingbird made a couple of loud "chups" and a long "zee" call. We placed the bird in a holding bag in the house and quickly processed the yellowthroat. Then we started what would prove to be a very difficult task.

In the hand, even in direct sunlight, the hummingbird's rufous color seemed duller, less orange, and no longer as shimmering as it had appeared in flight. The metallic green back also seemed to be a darker hue. Nonetheless, it was still a very beautiful bird.

The gorget was white, heavily streaked with lines of rufous and green feathers, producing a dusky appearance. When the sun struck at just the right angle, several gorget feathers appeared to be tipped with iridescent orange, and at the center of the gorget, there was a patch of brilliant copper. The supercilium and cheek were rufous. The cap and the back of the bird were metallic green. The rump, undertail coverts, flanks, and sides were rufous, the latter area flecked with green. The upper breast was white, and the belly was white with some rufous feathers. The central tail feathers were rufous at the base, dusky green in the middle, and broadly tipped with dusky black. The outer tail feathers were tipped with white and appeared very narrow.

After consulting all available field guides and books, we determined that the bird was clearly of the genus *Selasphorus* and was either an Allen's or a Rufous Hummingbird. Although adult female hummingbirds can appear very similar to immature males, it seemed unlikely that the gorget of an adult female would be so heavily streaked. Therefore, we decided that the bird was probably an immature male. But our references stated that only some adult male Allen's

and Rufous hummingbirds can be separated by plumage. Seeking assistance, Edith called Trevor Lloyd-Evans of the Manomet Bird Observatory. Trevor kindly interrupted a luncheon meeting to get us information on differentiating *Selasphorus* species.

As Edith was measuring the wing, the hummingbird suddenly died. The time was 12:40 P.M., less than forty minutes after the bird had been netted. We took further measurements, but we lacked a detailed identification key. Later, as Edith examined and prepared the specimen, she found that the bird had barely a trace of fat, indicating it had not been in good condition. The presence of two small gonads of equal size confirmed that the bird was a male. Although some female birds have paired ovaries, in most, the right ovary and oviduct fail to develop and remain as a tiny vestigial organ. Only the left gonad becomes a functional ovary.

Simon Perkins of the Massachusetts Audubon Society helpfully sent us a copy of "Age and Sex Determination in Rufous and Allen's Hummingbirds" by F. Gary Stiles (*The Condor* 74: 25-32, 1972). Dial calipers were used to measure the Nantucket specimen, because accuracy to one tenth of a millimeter was required. Of the measurements taken, the lengths of the tail and culmen fell within the range of Allen's and Rufous of both sexes. But the length of the wing chord and the width of the outermost tail feathers fell within the range of *only* the immature male Allen's. Using Stiles' key, helpfully provided by Simon Perkins, the findings pointed to the identification of the bird as an immature male Allen's Hummingbird.

Only one measurement was inconsistent with this identification. The central rectrices were too wide by Stiles' standards to be anything but a female Rufous (females are larger than males in the *Selasphorus* genus). However, by plumage, the Nantucket bird was an immature male. And autopsy had revealed it was not a female.

The opinion of an expert in *Selasphorus* identification was sought. At the recommendation of Simon Perkins, the specimen was sent to William H. Baltosser at the University of New Mexico. Dr. Baltosser and Dr. Allan R. Phillips at the Denver Museum of Natural History examined the bird and each independently concluded that the Nantucket bird was indeed an immature or subadult Allen's Hummingbird.

Unfortunately for the birder, there is no reliable method of separating immature and female Rufous and Allen's hummingbirds in the field. I learned from this event that they can also be difficult to identify in the hand. The female and immature birds of these species have nearly identical markings. To make matters worse, some immature male Rufous Hummingbirds may have completely developed gorgets as well as extensive green on the back, thus appearing very similar to adult male Allen's. The most diagnostic feature is the

width of the outer tail feathers, but several other features must be examined with equal care. And it is highly unlikely that fractions of a millimeter can be accurately measured through binoculars! However, if you are fortunate enough to see one of these rare jewels in the East, carefully observe the gorget, back, and tail. If the bird is one of these two species and the back is *completely* rufous, it may be safely identified as a Rufous Hummingbird. Otherwise, the bird can only be reported as a *Selasphorus* species.

ALAN BENNETT, a native New Englander, started birding in 1982 after inheriting an old pair of binoculars and a 1930 Peterson field guide. He has studied banding with Edith Andrews every fall since 1984 and plans to become a licensed bander. An educator by profession, Alan is the director of a small school in Boston. He plans to enter a graduate program in ornithology and environmental science. His goal is to improve the public's appreciation of birds and the need to preserve their habitats.



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