

BOOK REVIEWS

Hummingbirds of North America. With Jon L. Dunn. 2004. The Advanced Birding Video Series. Peregrine Video Productions, 7583 Estate Circle, Niwot, CO 80503; 303-652-3678; www.peregrinevideo.com. 179 minutes viewing time. VHS stereo. \$34.95, DVD \$39.95.

This series made its ambitious debuts in 1997 and 1999 with two videos covering North American gulls. Now it has tackled hummingbirds, a family famous for its powers of flight and iridescent colors, two attributes well suited to media capturing movement. As well as a conventional video cassette, this title (hereafter *Hummingbirds*) is available as a DVD that can be played on computers with CD drives and DVD software; the latter medium allows one to move around quickly within the video, which runs three hours. My review discusses layout and content as well as pros and cons of the media used.

Hummingbirds treats 24 species of hummingbirds that have been recorded in North America, north of Mexico (including the Cuban Emerald, whose occurrence is considered hypothetical by some authors, e.g., the A.O.U.), as well as three species unrecorded north of Mexico (the Rufous-tailed, Azure-crowned, and Amethyst-throated hummingbirds). The card of contents includes a figure showing some features of hummingbird anatomy and a thumbnail glossary of terms.

The introductory section is 12 minutes long and covers important background information. It discusses features useful in identification, such as tail movement on hovering birds (accompanied by well-chosen examples), tail-shape differences (which flash by too fast), and various plumage and bill features. The example chosen to illustrate different bill shapes (using the Broad-billed and White-eared Hummingbirds) was unfortunate: the bill shapes of the individuals shown do not appear overly different—and one's eyes are so impaled on the flagrant white head stripes of the White-eared that even hummingbird novices who watched the introduction with me wondered why these two species would even be considered particularly similar.

Following the introduction come species accounts, broken into five groups: the rufous-green group, the sheartail group, the gray-green group, small tropical hummingbirds (including the medium-sized White-eared and Xantus' hummingbirds), and large hummingbirds (including the genus *Amazilia*, oddly pronounced "Amazilla" in the narration). Species accounts range in length from about 2 to 12 minutes. They begin with an overview noting measurements, geographic range, migration schedule, behavior, sounds, and structure; then come age/sex accounts that cover plumage variation with numerous examples.

By this point you likely will have been seduced by the stunning photography that captures these avian jewels, often including direct comparisons of different species (e.g., a Calliope Hummingbird being replaced on the same perch by a Broad-tailed). I would guess that hundreds of hours of filming were edited down into the images that made the final cut—a lot of work. Commendably, date and location are noted for most birds shown in the species accounts, and, a nice touch, food plants are often also identified by brief on-screen captions that do not distract from the bird images.

Information content is generally high, with field marks both "hard" (e.g., primary shapes) and "soft" (e.g., upperpart coloration) being discussed. Sheri Williamson co-wrote the text with producer John Vanderpoel, and the numerous discussions of feather shapes and tail patterns reflect her extensive experience banding hummingbirds in Arizona. I found little to quibble over in terms of identification details, although I was surprised to learn that "subtle differences in plumage color" are considered a *reliable* field mark (emphasis mine) for problem female-plumaged Black-chinned and Ruby-throated hummingbirds.

Flight displays are shown by means of animated diagrams, a great idea given how difficult it is to capture these actions on video. However, for species I know well the dive displays portrayed are incomplete, or at best atypical; furthermore, the animation for Allen's Hummingbird is not synchronized with the sounds, plus it includes calls not

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given by birds during dives. The display of Anna's lacks its diagnostic sound.

Vocalizations can be very useful for identifying hummingbirds, but their potential was not fully realized in this video; for example, comparisons of the Calliope with the Broad-tailed and Rufous, and of the Black-chinned with the Rufous, do not involve analogous calls. And to hear all three species of the Black-chinned, Anna's, and Costa's at one time you have to wait until the last account, for Costa's—but then a good comparison is provided. Users should also note that sounds audible in much footage are often *not* those of the species being shown, which can be confusing (e.g., sounds from Rufous and Broad-tailed Hummingbirds, when a perched male Lucifer Hummingbird is being discussed). Some “quiet time” might have been helpful when the identification emphasizes plumage or structural characters. Quiet is an underappreciated commodity these days, yet it can promote thought and concentration.

Although Jon Dunn's narration is not overly hurried, by halfway through the first species account I found the information stream a little thick and fast. That said, at the end of the green-rufous group there is an excellent, if quick, group summary that conveys the key identification characters, with well-chosen examples. Inconsistently, the summary for the gray-green group is more cursory and too quick to be assimilated. This potential for information overload was also evident in the gull videos, but I am unsure how best to address the problem. Sitting down and flipping through a book, reading text, and comparing photos at your own pace is easier than watching a video that packs in so much information (but, of course, it isn't meant to be watched in one sitting). There is also a difference in text written for a book (which is how much of the narration sounds) and the more casual style of oral communication (which can be easier for a listening audience to receive); attention to this subtle but important distinction could help convey information more effectively.

Another possibility is to slow the video's pace and allow more time with single-frame images—but then, the video is already three hours long! The pause button on your VCR player is likely to wear out quickly while you try to absorb hundreds of helpful facts. The DVD is may be more user-friendly for moving around within accounts, but it is more prone to technical glitches; for example, while I was watching the accounts for Black-chinned and Cinnamon Hummingbirds, and the introduction for the genus *Archilochus*, the video “froze” and could not be viewed in full. But difficulties in getting out of an account and back to the start may simply reflect my own technological incompetence.

The introduction to *Hummingbirds* recommends it be used in conjunction with specialized field guides. Perhaps it could have been produced as an adjunct to these, utilizing its strengths to illustrate flight behavior and compare vocalizations in detail, and not worrying so much about tail-patterns, range maps, and such that can be studied at leisure in books?

The goal of *Hummingbirds* is stated as being to give you the tools to identify these gems wherever you find them in North America. The tools are surely provided but, probably not intentionally, the hyperactiveness of hummingbirds sometimes seems transmitted to the pace of the video. While exciting to watch, this level of intensity can make it difficult to concentrate for long. Thus, there is a huge amount of great information and fantastic video contained in *Hummingbirds*, but I wonder if it tries to deliver too much.

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