Buzz-wings

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It is the average Nebraskan were asked how many species of hummingbirds are in the state, he would likely reply that although initially much smaller than the nest cup, the two young grow at a remarkable pace, and within about two weeks outgrow the available space. As they grow, the nest is flattened by their weight until it sometimes comes to look like a thick pancake.

In Nebraska, the species of hummingbird most likely to be seen, and indeed the only one likely to be seen in the eastern half of the state, is the ruby-throated hummingbird. This is the most widely distributed of all North American hummingbirds, and its breeding range covers virtually all of eastern North America north nearly to Hudson Bay. The nesting range includes most of eastern Nebraska, but only along the Missouri River is nesting at all regular. Nests have been reported as far west as North Platte. Ruby-throats typically arrive in Nebraska in early April, with about half of the total available spring arrival records occurring between May 5 and 17. By June most of these birds will have continued northward, to return again in August during the fall migration. Typically, birds leave in mid September. In mild falls, stragglers may persist until early October.

Although ruby-throats have been reported as far west in Nebraska as Scotts Bluff County, bird watchers in the Panhandle should be on the alert for other species as well. The most likely of these is the broad-tailed, which has been observed in Dawes and Scotts Bluff counties. Broad-tails regularly nest in Colorado, and are the species most likely to be seen there in summer.

Two other species of hummingbirds have also been reported in western Nebraska. The rufous occupies a large summer range in western North America and occasionally strays into western Nebraska during fall migration.

The last and rarest species of hummingbird to occur in Nebraska is the calliope, which breeds fairly commonly in western Wyoming, and which has only been seen a few times in the state. The calliope is the smallest of the hummingbirds that visit Nebraska, but is so beautiful that even a fleeting glimpse of the stunning male is long remembered.

Author Paul A. Johnsgard is a Foundation Professor of Life Sciences at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, and author of 19 books including The Platte: Channels in Time; Birds of the Great Plains: Breeding Species and Their Distribution, and books of such groups as the grouse, cranes, waterfowl and shorebirds of the world. He has also written some popular books such as Song of the North Wind on snow geese, and Those of the Gray Wind about sandhill cranes.