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Birds of the Rocky Mountains -- Paul A. Johnsgard

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***Birds of the Rocky Mountains*—Species Accounts, pages
217–228: Nighthawks, Swifts, & Hummingbirds**

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Common Nighthawk (*Chordeiles minor*)

Identification: This is a long-winged bird the size of a small hawk, but with pointed wings that have white patches near the tip resembling windows. The flight is light and butterfly-like, and often is accompanied by a swooping dive and a loud booming sound. Most active at dawn and dusk; during the day sometimes seen perched on fenceposts or on tree branches, almost the color of dead wood, but with a white throat and large dark eyes.

LATILONG STATUS

S	S	S	s
s	S	s	s

S	S	S	S
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S	S	s	S
s	S	S	S

s	S	S	S
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S	s	S	S
S	S	S	S

S	S	S	S
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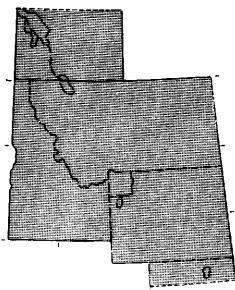
Status: A summer resident throughout the region, mainly below the zone of coniferous forests, but breeding in most of the montane parks, especially the more southern ones.

Habitats and Ecology: This species forages entirely in the air, on flying insects, and is especially common over grassland and urban areas, sometimes extending to sagebrush and desert scrub. Nesting occurs on the ground, usually in grasslands, or at the edges of woods, and sometimes on the asphalt rooftops of buildings.

Seasonality: Wyoming records are from May 23 to October 15, with migration peaks in early June and September. Montana records are from early June to late September, and in Colorado the birds have been reported from April 30 to November 5. Wyoming egg records are from June 15 to July 12, and Colorado records are from June 5 to July 17. Active nests in Montana have been seen from mid-June to August 18.

Comments: Nighthawks compete with swallows and swifts for aerial insects, especially the latter, but probably can find their prey under lower light conditions than either of these. Their loud aerial displays, penetrating calls, and distinctive white wing markings are probably also reflections of their daily activity patterns usually occurring under reduced light conditions.

Suggested Reading: Selander, 1954; Caccamese, 1974; Armstrong, 1965.



Common Poor-will (*Phalaenoptilus nuttallii*)

Identification: Similar to the common nighthawk in general shape and behavior, but lacking the white wing patches, and instead having white markings on the outer tail feathers. The species' call is a *poor-will* or *poor-will-uk* note that is often repeated during early summer evenings.

Status: A local summer resident in the region, mainly on drier plains toward the south. The only montane park supporting the species as a breeder is Rocky Mountain N.P., where the birds occur around rocky outcrops at lower elevations.

Habitats and Ecology: Generally this species is associated with rocky habitats having a cover of arid-adapted shrubs or low trees, such as pinyon-juniper, saltbush, greasewood, sagebrush, and dry grasslands. The birds nest on the ground, often under scrub oaks, whose leaves provide concealment for both adults and young.

Seasonality: Wyoming records are from May 3 to September 18, Montana records are from May 9 to September 15, and Colorado records extend from April 27 to October 13. Egg records in Colorado are from May 20 to June 14, and dependent young have been seen from June 6 to July 9. Similar dates are suggested for Wyoming and Montana.

Comments: This ghost-like species is seen far less often than are common nighthawks, and is more likely to be heard than seen. Sometimes they flush from gravel roads at night and one sees them momentarily in the beam of the headlights, but probably most go unseen by humans.

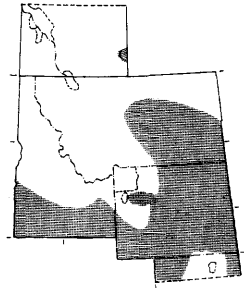
Suggested Reading: Bent, 1940.

LATILONG STATUS

		?	
	s	?	
	M	s	

M	M		S
		M	M
	s	s	s

M	M	S	s
s	S	S	S
S	s		s



Black Swift (*Cypseloides niger*)

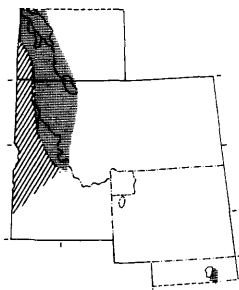
Identification: This is the largest of the four swifts of the region, and the most uniformly blackish, both above and below. It is larger than the chimney swift, and has a slightly forked tail, and is darker below than either of the other two swift species.

LATILONG STATUS

s	s	S
s	s	S
S	?	M

M		
	V	
	?	

		M
	M	S



Status: A local summer resident in montane areas from Alberta south to central Montana, and again in northern Colorado. Rocky Mountain N.P. and Banff N.P. both support good populations.

Habitats and Ecology: Associated with mountains having steep, almost inaccessible cliffsides for nesting, often in narrow canyons, and almost always close to waterfalls. In Rocky Mountain National Park nests have been found at 10,500 feet at Loch Vale. Nesting in caves has been reported in other areas.

Seasonality: In Colorado the records extend from June 7 to September 12, and in Montana from mid-May to late August. Eggs in Colorado have been found from July 7 to August 17, and nestlings as late as early September. In Montana nestlings have been observed from July 25 to August 7. Nestlings have been seen near Banff (Johnston's Canyon) in early September.

Comments: This is one of the least known birds of the region, owing to its nesting in such extremely inaccessible locations. Bailey and Niedrach (*Birds of Colorado*) provided an extensive summary of nest studies in that state.

Suggested Reading: Knorr, 1961; Hunter & Baldwin, 1962.

Chimney Swift (*Chaetura pelagica*)

Identification: A dark gray swift, with a cigar-shaped body and long, tapering wings. It closely resembles the Vaux's swift, but is slightly darker on the undersides and has a louder, more chattering call.

Status: Rare in the area, and limited regionally to eastern Montana and northeastern Colorado. Absent from the montane parks except for Rocky Mountain N.P., where an accidental summer vagrant.

Habitats and Ecology: A familiar city bird over most of eastern North America, mainly in the vicinity of towns and cities where chimneys offer roosting and nesting sites. Caves and hollow trees were used before chimneys became available, and may occasionally still be used in some localities.

Seasonality: In Montana records are from May 10 to July 27, and Colorado records extend from April 28 to October 14. In that state eggs or nestlings have been noted in mid-July, and nesting in the region probably occurs from mid-May to late June.

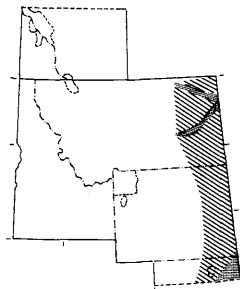
Comments: This is the only species of swift in North America to have become relatively dependent on humans for nesting sites, and to have apparently benefited from that association. Perhaps as a result, it has slowly extended its range westwardly, and now has almost reached the range of the Vaux's swift in the Rocky Mountains.

Suggested Reading: Bent, 1940; Fisher, 1958.

LATILONG STATUS

M		M

	M	M
	M	
		S



Vaux's Swift (*Chaetura vauxi*)

Identification: Very similar to a chimney swift, but slightly paler below, and with a somewhat higher-pitched call. Unlikely to be seen entering or leaving chimneys.

LATILONG STATUS

s	s	S	
s	S	s	s
S	S	S	M

			?

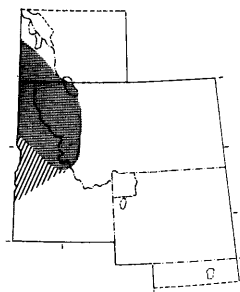
Status: A summer resident in the northwestern parts of the region, including Glacier N.P., where it breeds commonly. Unreported for Wyoming or Colorado.

Habitats and Ecology: Generally similar to the chimney swift, but it seldom nests in chimneys, and instead uses hollow trees. Often found in woodlands near rivers and lakes. The nests are often placed in western hemlocks with dead or broken-off tops, or sometimes on cliffs.

Seasonality: Montana records extend from April 30 to September 1. There are no available egg records for the region, but in Montana nestlings have been observed from July 16 to August 10.

Comments: In Glacier National Park these birds are often seen near Avalanche Campground, as well as in the McDonald Valley, along the North Fork of the Flathead River, and near the Flathead Ranger Station.

Suggested Reading: Baldwin & Hunter, 1963; Baldwin & Zaczkowski, 1963.



White-throated Swift (*Aeronautes saxatilis*)

Identification: This is the only swift of the region with mostly white underparts, contrasting sharply with black flanks. The tail is long and fairly forked, and the birds are usually found near cliffs and canyons.

Status: A widespread summer resident in mountainous areas of the region, more common southwardly, and absent from the Canadian montane parks.

Habitats and Ecology: Associated with steep cliffs, deep canyons, and generally mountainous terrain, sometimes as high as 13,000 feet. Nesting occurs in crevices of canyon walls, in completely inaccessible locations.

Seasonality: Wyoming records are from April 4 to September 9, with peaks in late April and early September. Montana records are from April 19 to August 12, and Colorado records are from March 23 to October 12. In Colorado eggs have been reported in mid- to late June, and in Wyoming and Montana nesting extends from mid-June (eggs) to mid-July (nestling young).

Comments: The nests of this species of swift are composed largely of feathers, which are mixed with grasses and glued together in usual swift fashion, and attached to the sides of rock walls. Copulation evidently occurs in the air, as has also been reported for other swifts. On their wintering areas the birds are highly social, and sometimes hundreds will roost in rock-crevice sites. In one case the birds were observed to enter the site by flying through an entry only two or three inches wide and less than three feet long.

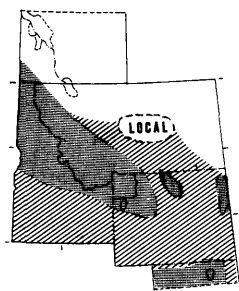
Suggested Reading: Bent, 1940; Bartholomew et al., 1957.

LATILONG STATUS

s	M	s	
s	s	s	
S	S	S	s

s	S	M	S
	S	S	S
	M	S	S

s	M	S	M
M	S	M	M
S	S	s	S



Magnificent Hummingbird (*Eugenes fulgens*)

Identification: The largest hummingbird of the region, and the only one in which males have a blackish breast and a green gorget. Females are much duller, but also are rather dark below, and like the male have a small oval white spot behind the eye.

LATILONG STATUS

V		

V	V	V

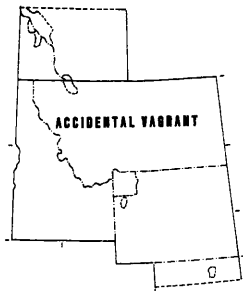
Status: An accidental summer vagrant in the southern part of the region, nesting to the south in Arizona and casually in the mountains of Colorado. Reported in Rocky Mountain N.P. on several occasions, and one nesting occurred within 15 miles of the southern boundary of the park in 1965.

Habitats and Ecology: This hummingbird often occurs along lower mountain streams, especially in the ponderosa pine zone, but sometimes reaching the fir belt. Open areas of forest are preferred, where there are many flowering herbs such as penstemons and the like.

Seasonality: There are relatively few regional records, but in Colorado the birds have been seen from May 21 to August, and eggs have been reported in late July. In Arizona there are egg records from May 6 to July 28, with a maximum between mid-June and mid-July.

Comments: This species until recently was known as Rivoli's hummingbird, and it has an extensive breeding range reaching south to Panama. Apparently the Colorado occurrences represent a recent range extension, and the birds have been seen as far north as Jackson Hole, Wyoming.

Suggested Reading: Johnsgard, 1983a.



Ruby-throated Hummingbird (*Archilochus colubris*)

Identification: This eastern species of hummingbird has (in adult males) a ruby-red throat gorget, a slightly forked tail, and rather dusky flanks. In flight it lacks the loud buzzing noise of the similar broad-tailed, and the black to violet throat of the black-chinned. Females and immature males are too difficult to identify with certainty in the field except perhaps by experts.

Status: A rare summer resident in eastern Montana; elsewhere in the region a rare migrant or vagrant; the only montane park reporting the species is Watertown Lakes N.P., where it is rare.

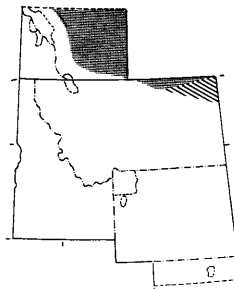
Habitats and Ecology: This is the familiar hummingbird of the eastern half of North America, where it is the only breeding species. It occupies a variety of woodland habitats, but is mostly found in open hardwood forests or forest edges, and in similar habitats such as orchards or city parks where a variety of nectar-bearing flowers are to be found.

Seasonality: There are few records for the area, but the birds are usually found in the northern plains from mid- or late May onward, with active nests in late June and early July. In Alberta they return about mid-May, and remain until about the end of September or early November.

Comments: This is the most widely distributed of North American hummingbirds, and one with an extremely long migration pattern, with migrants sometimes reaching Panama. At least some birds fly across the Gulf of Mexico during migration, an incredible feat for a bird weighing only slightly more than three grams, and one of the smallest warm-blooded animals in the world.

Suggested Reading: Johnsgard, 1983a.

LATILONG STATUS



Black-chinned Hummingbird (*Archilochus alexandri*)

Identification: Adult males of this species are unique in having a black chin, with a purplish rear border, and a whitish band between the gorget and the rather grayish flanks. Females and immature males cannot be separated in the field from those of ruby-throats, which in this region are rare or accidental except in the northeastern areas.

LATILONG STATUS

s	S	V	
s	s	s	
S	S	S	

M			
		M	
	M	M	

S	s	s	V

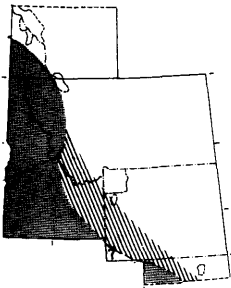
Status: A summer resident in the western and southwestern parts of the region, mainly at lower elevations. A rare migrant or vagrant in the montane parks, but common and probably breeding at Dinosaur N.M.

Habitats and Ecology: Typically associated with riparian habitats in dry canyons, but also occurring in oak-juniper woodlands, edges of aspen groves, and other habitats that usually are near water and offer open areas with many flowering plants.

Seasonality: Montana records extend from May 27 to late July, and in Colorado there are records from April 21 to September 22. Eggs in Colorado have been found as early as May 16, and nestlings to July 11; in Montana nestlings have been seen from June 27 to July 19.

Comments: This is a close relative of the ruby-throated hummingbird and they have generally complementary distributions, although the black-chin is associated with relatively drier habitats. They also have a much shorter migratory pattern, wintering almost entirely in Mexico.

Suggested Reading: Johnsgard, 1983a.



Calliope Hummingbird (*Stellula calliope*)

Identification: The smallest hummingbird of the region, and adult males are unique in having a striped gorget of iridescent scarlet and white. Females are best recognized by their tiny size, slightly streaked throat, and pale cinnamon underparts.

Status: A common summer resident over most of the area west of the plains; probably the commonest breeding species in most of the montane parks.

Habitats and Ecology: Open meadow areas near coniferous forests, such as low willow or sage areas rich in plants such as Indian paintbrush or gilia, are favored areas for this species in the Jackson Hole area. Openings in woodlands, sometimes as high as timberline, are also frequented, and in late summer alpine meadows are commonly used by migrating birds.

Seasonality: Wyoming records are from May 20 to August 12, and those from Colorado are from May 9 to August 9. Egg records in Montana are from June 18 to 20. In the Jackson Hole area nesting occurs in mid- to late June, with hatching near the end of July.

Comments: The nests of this species, like most hummingbirds, are extremely difficult to locate, but often are placed in lodgepole pines, in a clump of old cones, where their size, shape, and color blend in perfectly with the cones. They also are usually placed under a large branch for protection from the elements, but with open sky to the east, where the rays of the morning sun will help warm the incubating bird after a cold night.

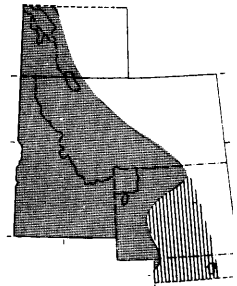
Suggested Reading: Johnsgard, 1983a; Calder, 1971.

LATILONG STATUS

S	S	S	s
s	S	s	s
S	S	S	s

s	S	s	s
s	S	S	
s	S	S	

		M	
S			M
M		M	M



Broad-tailed Hummingbird (*Selasphorus platycercus*)

Identification: Adult males of this species can usually be recognized by the loud, buzzy, and insect-like trill made by their wings while in flight. They resemble large ruby-throats, which are very rare in the region. Females and immatures are more difficult to identify, but have speckled throats, pale cinnamon flanks, and are fairly large for hummingbirds.

LATILONG STATUS

	M	S	
?	?	?	
V	?	M	

?	M		
s	S	S	
	S	s	M

M	s	s	S
M	S	S	S
S	s	S	S

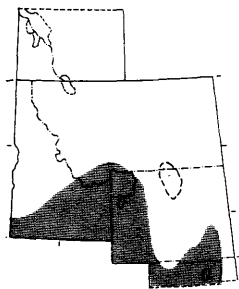
Status: A summer resident in the southern parts of the region, mainly west of the plains and south of Montana. The common breeding hummingbird in Rocky Mountain N.P., but rare or absent from the more northerly ones.

Habitats and Ecology: Typically associated with ponderosa pine forests and aspen groves, but also extending into mountain meadows and pinyon-juniper woodlands in this region. In Colorado breeding birds are abundant in moist canyons with aspens, pines, or Douglas fir at about 6500 to 7500 feet elevation. During the summer the birds gradually move upwards, finally reaching alpine meadows in late summer.

Seasonality: In Wyoming records extend from May 9 to September 16, and in Montana from May 31 to mid-August. The span of Colorado records is from April 27 to October 24, with eggs reported from June 7 to July 20. Wyoming egg records are from June 15 to July 13.

Comments: The distinctive noises made by males of this species are produced by the outermost primary feathers, which are pointed and vibrate rapidly during flight. This noise probably adds impact to the impressive visual displays of territorial males, which involve vertical dives from 30 or 40 feet, often directly in front of a perched female.

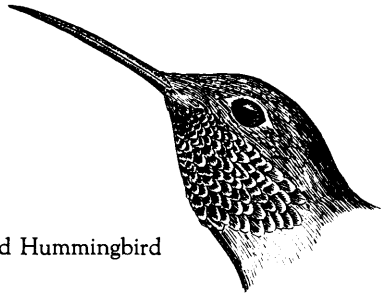
Suggested Reading: Johnsgard, 1983a.



Three-toed Woodpecker



White-throated Swift



Broad-tailed Hummingbird

Rufous Hummingbird (*Selasphorus rufus*)

Identification: The only rusty-colored hummingbird of the area; both sexes are distinctly orange-red on the flanks and upperparts. Adult males also have a bright scarlet gorget, while females and immature males usually show some red or greenish spotting on the throat region.

LATILONG STATUS

S	S	S	M
s	S	S	S
S	S	S	s

M	M	M	M
M	S	S	M
	S	M	

M	M	M	M
	M	M	M
M	V	M	M

Status: A summer resident in the northern parts of the area, becoming less common southwardly and generally rare in Wyoming. The common breeding hummingbird of the Alberta montane parks, but not known to breed south of the Jackson Hole area.

Habitats and Ecology: In general, coniferous forests are used for breeding, but the birds occupy a variety of forest-edge habitats including mountain meadows and burned over forest areas where flowers are abundant. Brushy areas in the foothills are also used on migration, as are urban gardens and alpine tundra.

Seasonality: In Alberta and Montana the birds are present from late May or early June to mid-September. Migrants in Colorado and Wyoming are present from mid-May to about June 10, and again from late July to mid- or late September. Eggs in Montana have been observed in mid-July, and nestlings in early July.

Comments: Rufous hummingbirds are, like all hummingbirds, highly territorial, and males defending territories often advertise them with display flights that describe large aerial ovals, during which a mechanical buzzing sound is produced, ending in a distinctive rattling noise. The outer tail feathers of this species, rather than the primary feathers of the broad-tailed hummingbird, are distinctly narrowed and evidently vibrate in flight.

Suggested Reading: Johnsgard, 1983a.

