

Identification of Selasphorus Hummingbirds

By John F. Garrett

Hummingbirds have long dazzled humans in many ways, including color, behavior, and their long bills that they use to suck nectar. Unfortunately, they can dazzle birders in other ways when it comes to identification. Members of the genus *Selasphorus* are infamous for being incredibly difficult when not impossible to identify, especially the females and juveniles. There are six species of *Selasphorus* worldwide, but only three reach the ABA Area. They are the Broad-tailed Hummingbird (*S. platycercus*), the Rufous Hummingbird (*S. rufus*), and the Allen's Hummingbird (*S. sasin*). They can all be difficult to identify, but the two most problematic are the Rufous and Allen's Hummingbirds. Both are small, zippy, hummingbirds with bright orangey-rufous coloration. However, with some time, patience, luck, some flowers or hummingbird feeders, experience, and quick reflexes, you should be able to correctly identify many, if not most, of the *Selasphorus* hummingbirds you see down to species. One of the problems is that *Selasphorus* hummingbirds are often seen just briefly zipping by either chasing or being chased by another hummingbird. Yet even then, you can still sometimes tell what species it is.

Rufous vs. Allen's, all variations: One of the first things to consider is where you are and what time of year it is. Look at the range map of any field guide and see which species is more likely where you are. Rufous Hummingbirds breed from extreme southwestern Alaska and northern British Columbia, south to southern Washington, and east to western Montana. In spring migration they are found along the 'Pacific Coast States', and in fall migration they can be found as far east as western Texas. Within the ABA Area, they are uncommon winter visitors down in the southeastern United States, although most of them winter in Mexico. The Allen's Hummingbird breeds along the Pacific coast, and only in fall migration does it ever venture as east as southeastern Arizona; in spring migration it is primarily confined to western California. Allen's Hummingbirds are rare but regular winter visitors to Louisiana, but like the Rufous Hummingbird, it winters mainly in Mexico. The distribution-wise expanding subspecies *sedentarius* of the Allen's Hummingbird lives in certain areas of southwestern California, including Los Angeles County and the Channel Islands, and is a year-round resident that breeds in winter. So, if you discover a female *Selasphorus* sitting on her nest on a suburban street in Los Angeles, CA, it is an Allen's Hummingbird without question. However, if you notice some female *Selasphorus* visiting a hummingbird feeder in late spring in southeastern Arizona, they are certainly Rufous Hummingbirds. So, about 99% of the time you can safely identify most *Selasphorus* just by range. Beware, though, because in many locations both Rufous and Allen's Hummingbirds can be found at the same time.

Another clue is vocalization. Just the very sound of a *Selasphorus* buzzing by can be helpful. The wing trill of the Rufous in flight is slightly higher and buzzier than that of the Allen's; however, if you haven't heard either one, it would be impossible to tell in the field. I personally recommend visiting a location that has many Allen's but no Rufous Hummingbirds, listening very carefully to its call, and then going somewhere where there are many Rufous but no Allen's Hummingbirds and noticing the slight difference in the wing trill. Then, if you go somewhere with both Rufous and Allen's Hummingbirds, you should be able to identify them correctly entirely by voice. At my house in Pasadena, California, where Allen's by far outnumber Rufous most of the year, there was a major invasion of Rufous in spring 2006, so I learned to tell the difference.

Size is another difference, but it is only noticeable in the hand, and there is some very slight overlap. The length of the Allen's Hummingbird is usually from 3.2- 3.6 inches, and its weight is 0.11 oz. The slightly larger Rufous Hummingbird usually ranges in length from 3.5- 4 inches, and is 0.12 oz in weight. Because of that overlap, size is almost useless in the field.

A characteristic that could be used in the field, but definitely not in the hand, is behavior and aggressiveness. The Rufous Hummingbird are probably the most aggressive hummingbird in North America, which is saying a lot, because almost every North American hummingbird is also highly territorial. The Allen's Hummingbird, however, is relatively shy, in that they usually prefer unguarded flowers to watched feeders. If there are Anna's Hummingbirds (*Calypte anna*) around, notice how they cooperate with the selasphorus. If the selasphorus is chasing away the Anna's, then the selasphorus is definitely a Rufous. If the selasphorus is being chased away by an Anna's, then it is probably an Allen's. This will not work with, say, a Black-chinned Hummingbird, because in some places Black-chinned is even shyer than Allen's, whereas at other locations they can be extremely aggressive, even towards Rufous. In plain English, Rufous Hummingbirds are more aggressive than Allen's.

Rufous vs. Allen's, The Males: Differences between the male selasphorus hummingbirds is usually very easy. Both are mostly rufous and orange with green shoulders, white breasts, and a dark red gorget. The Allen's has an iridescent green back and cap, and in most but not all individuals this green coloration extends to the rump. The Rufous has an entirely red-orange back, the only green being on the shoulders, although many Rufous do have one or two green feathers on their back. Unfortunately up to 5% of their total population can have entirely green backs and caps, making it nearly impossible to separate from Allen's, especially the 'orange-rumped' individuals. In this case, the only difference is the tail. Both species have orange tails with five pairs of retrices, each one with a black tip. On Rufous, these black tips on the retrices are much broader, whereas on Allen's they are much thinner. Also, on Rufous, R2 (retrix 2) has a small notch at the end, a feature that Allen's lacks. These tail differences are incredibly difficult to see in the field, though, as they are only flicked out momentarily.

Another clue comes in behavior. All species of hummingbirds have their own 'dive display' that is performed by the males of the species. The Allen's Hummingbird's dive display begins with a series of small, shallow 'U'-shaped dives and ends with a single, tall, 'J'-shaped dive. The Rufous Hummingbird does a series of 'J'-shaped dives. The call of the Allen's performing its dive display is a high-pitched, humming, buzzy, whistle. The Rufous is somewhat similar, but it stutters, rather than whistles, and is barely, yet noticeably, higher-pitched and buzzier. Also, females tend to be watching the males' performance, which can be an aid in identification of the females.

The Females and Juveniles: Even with these clues, many female selasphorus must be left unidentified. Both have green backs and caps, light orange sides and flanks, white breasts and bellies, mottled green and orange rumps, weak orange post ocular lines, off-white throats with some vertical greenish-gray streaks, and iridescent red feathers towards the center of their throats. The juveniles are similar except that they lack the red throat spot and their throats are whiter, with fewer streaks. Within all of this, there many variations of amount of rufous in the throat. Rufous Hummingbirds' throats are typically slightly whiter than the Allen's, but there is very much overlap. The only real physical difference is in the tail. Both species have mostly rufous tails, R1 has green tips, R2 has black tips, and R3, R4, and RS are mostly black but have rufous bases and the very ends are white. The one true difference between female Rufous and Allen's Hummingbirds is that R2 on Rufous is notched at the end (like the male) and R2 on

Allen's is normal-shaped (rounded). On the immature Rufous, unfortunately, the notch on R2 is hardly noticeable or absent. In this case, it is usually best to let it go unidentified.

Broad-tailed and Calliope Hummingbirds: Of the Broad-tailed Hummingbird, the third selasphorus hummingbird, only the females are likely to be confused with other selasphorus. The female Broad-tailed has much less rufous, with only some on R3 and R4, plus a light orange wash on the sides, flanks, and undertail coverts, a shorter bill, and is slightly bigger and chunkier.

The male Broad-tailed is very unlikely to be confused with any other selasphorus hummingbird, with its lack of rufous (except for some on the very edges of R1, R2, and R3). Hopeful or beginning birders in the Rocky Mountains and the Great Basin might confuse it with the adult male Anna's Hummingbird, at least momentarily, and vice versa in California. Anna's has an iridescent red cap. Its tail is not as big as it is in the Broad-tailed, nor does the Anna's have any rufous or white spots on it. Anna's lacks the distinctive buzzy wing-trill that is typical of all selasphorus but instead has a relatively deep low whirring hum. In locations where their ranges overlap, such as southeastern Arizona, it is very easy to see the differences for yourself.

The male Calliope Hummingbird (*Stellula calliope*), the smallest bird in North America is unlikely to be confused with any other hummingbird, especially with its streaked gorget. The female, however, looks very much like a miniature Broad-tailed. It is much smaller, however, has an entirely plain brown tail, and has no rufous coloration, but does have buffy sides and flanks. Also, when perched, the wingtips extend to the tail, while in the Broad-tailed, the tail projects farther. The Calliope Hummingbird often holds its tail up horizontally, like the three selasphorus.

After much practice, identification of the selasphorus hummingbirds, and a few others, as well, should become much easier. The next time you see an unidentified selasphorus at a feeder, don't just call it 'another selasphorus,' actually identify it to species!

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