

Tiny...But Tough

By Alexandria Simpson

I'm sitting quietly near a hummingbird feeder in my woods waiting for one of my feathered friends, a male Buff-bellied Hummingbird. He rules the roost around here, in my yard and woods, driving away all other hummers away. Since we have more than one feeder, we tried to space them further apart, but a lot of good it did: he still rules two of them.

Aha! Patience has paid off; here he comes. When the sunlight shines on his bright green feathers, he commands attention; his red bill is also an eyecatcher. His trademark buff-colored belly and white stripe under his tiny feet surprised me when I first viewed him closely. His top is dark, almost black; this helps him blend well among the trees. Perhaps his back is so dark because the wooded area he calls home is dense and somewhat dark at times. Sitting with his back to me, I could easily miss him. Unlike other hummers, he does not have a splotch of iridescent red, purple, pink or blue. Instead, he has a rather plain bluish-green patch on his throat. In flight, his rufous tail has three distinct notches; while perching, his tail is folded up with only one notch visible.

When he approaches a feeder, his loud ZZZT, ZZZT is usually heard announcing his arrival. Once, two hummers flew right past my ear. I heard a whoosh and they were gone.

Although they are tiny, hummers put up a great fight. I'm betting on them any time. Buff-bellied hummers will even knock each other to the ground. My mom saw this happen one day near our feeders. She thought the hummer knocked a butterfly down, but it was another hummingbird. When she got close enough, the hummer got up from the ground and flew off. Where was I that day?!

I was very surprised to discover that hummingbirds perch for long periods of time on branches. I had heard that hummers never perch. I guess these people don't observe hummingbirds very often. It was a lesson in how observation is much better than reading a book and not believing everything you hear.

Hummers preen themselves with their legs; their beaks are too long. It reminds me of a dog scratching himself. As the hummer's leg comes up to its head, he leans out with his head slightly cocked.

As for his feeding habits, I have only seen him feeding at our feeders. There are no flowers in our woods. I have seen his tongue come in and out of the feeder's "flowers".

The Buff-bellied Hummingbird is a year round resident in the Rio Grande Valley, but I see more in the spring and summer. Its habitat is a mesquite woodland.

This month, September, provides prime hummingbird watching opportunities in the Rio Grande Valley, especially the Ruby-throated and Black-chinned Hummingbirds. These two are usually not seen here during summer or winter. Sometimes eight to ten hummingbirds are surrounding one feeder. It is sometimes a challenge to keep my feeders full of "nectar".

In my woods, the two resident Buff-bellies team up to guard "their" feeders. One has set itself between two of the feeders, while the other mans the third. They will not let anyone else near when they are there. It does not matter if you are male, female, Buff-belly, Ruby-throated, or Black-chinned: you are driven off.

The other day, two hummers were drinking on opposite sides of a feeder. They would drink a bit and then at the same time pull back a little and look at each other. After a few seconds, they were back to drinking. This funny scene repeated itself several times. Finally, they decided to fight it out. Then they both flew off.

Another time, when the Buff-bellies were not around, four females and a male were trying to drink at one feeder. There were not enough "flowers" to go around, so little skirmishes broke out. One could almost imagine the conversation: "Hey, he's gone; let's feed!" "Hurry up! It's my turn." "Don't cut in line." "Quit pushing."

When the Buff-belly returned, he was not very happy. He started driving the other hummers off. It took some time, because as he drove one off, another would swoop in. Finally, he managed to chase off all the others. This tiny but tough bird sat gloating on a branch very close to the feeder. He had won the prize!

Birding is helping me develop patience. If I am patient and sit quietly long enough, the hummers will show me their beauty. Hummers are one of my favorite bird groups, and I'd have to say the Buff-bellied Hummingbird is my favorite species.