

Naturally: A little jewel gets some jewelry

- By CAROL GUBA Special to the Gazette
- October 7,, 2023 3 hrs ago



Handling a hummingbird for the banding process requires training and skill to not harm the tiny creature.

- Submitted photo

In early December, a group from Todd Bird Club had an opportunity to travel to southern Indiana County to watch the banding of a rufous hummingbird that was visiting a feeder.

Rufous hummingbirds are not native to this area. The only hummingbird species normally found east of the Mississippi River is the ruby-throated hummingbird. Many people enjoy feeding ruby-throated hummingbirds during the summer months, watching their antics as they zip around when coming to the feeders and flowers we put out for them.

The rufous hummingbird, however, is native to the western United States, breeding farther north than any other hummingbird. On their migration route, rufous hummingbirds travel north along the Pacific Coast to their breeding grounds from the Pacific Northwest to southern Alaska, and then follow a clockwise path to the Rockies and south to their wintering grounds in Mexico in the fall.

So, why was this little visitor here? The bird was most likely brought here on a storm or front. Birds can get pushed along by strong fronts, hurricanes and other weather events. After a big storm or hurricane, many birders head out to see what species the weather has dropped on their doorstep, often finding rarities that are far removed from their normal haunts.

Hurricane birding really is a thing. Many birds that have been pushed into unfamiliar territory, rest and feed to regain their strength before, hopefully, returning to where they belong. Some will stay where they end up and live out the remainder of their lives there.

This rufous hummingbird was first spotted in late September. It continued coming to the same feeder for several months where she was captured and banded before being released back into nature. Arrangements were made to have Sandy Lockerman, a licensed bird bander, capture the bird and band it, adding to the pool of information the scientific community gathers about birds that help us better understand them.

Bird banders are licensed by the U.S. Geological Survey (USGS) Bird Banding Lab and serve an apprenticeship or take classes to gain the skills necessary to gather data and band birds with the efficiency and safety that best protects the birds.

The feeder was put inside a special cage constructed by Sandy's husband with a trap door they would operate to capture the bird. They got the bird almost immediately. She must have been hungry.

Sandy took the bird out of the cage, began to examine it, dictating measurements and information to her husband who recorded the data. We gathered around them watching. Some of the information collected about banded birds includes species, sex, weight, length, feather condition, overall condition and more.

While Sandy was doing all this, she explained what she was doing, answered questions and carefully watched the little bird in her hand. She explained that she had to make sure her hands stayed warm enough to not put the bird into torpor, a state of decreased physiological activity that some birds use to slow their bodily functions to better survive cold nights when they can't feed to stay warm.

She also watched closely for signs of excessive stress, explaining that she would release the bird without banding or even collecting data rather than stress the bird so much that it might endanger its life. She was able to collect the data and continue banding.

Each species has a specific band based on their size. Bird banders receive numbered bands and carefully record which band is used for each individual. This number will be used to identify this individual bird if it is ever captured again, revealing secrets of where she went next and more.

They have specialized pliers that will close the band around the bird's leg, leaving no rough edges to catch on anything, while ensuring that the band is fully closed but not impinging on the bird's leg.

We were amazed at how tiny the band was for this little bird. It was not an easy task to give this hummingbird her ankle bracelet, but in Sandy's skilled hands it went off without a hitch.

There are opportunities for everyone to see bird banding and to see some of our most beautiful birds up close and personal. Powdermill Nature Reserve in Rector bands birds year-round. Anyone can schedule a visit to see banding and other research being done there.

If you get the opportunity, go. I highly recommend it. You will learn so much about birds and fall in love with them.

While ankle bracelets are not all the rage they were in the 1980s and '90s, they are still popular with the feathered set, and I was happy to see this little jewel of a hummingbird get her very own ankle bracelet.

May she wear it in good health.



Hummingbird ring: See the tiny band for the hummingbird shown on an adult index finger.

- Submitted photo

Carol Guba has a love of nature and a degree in biology from IUP. She has worked in many biological fields, from environmental to medical research to animal husbandry and more. The Naturally columns are brought to you each month by the Indiana Gazette and Friends of White's Woods to showcase the wonders of nature in our area.