

Anna's World



TEXT AND PHOTOS BY
WOODY WHEELER

If you have been birding on the West Coast lately, you have probably seen Anna's Hummingbirds. This species seems to be adapting well to the human-altered landscape. Nationally renowned birder and author Kenn Kaufman refers to Anna's as "the familiar year-round hummer of the west coast..."

Anna's Hummingbirds have dramatically expanded their original range in Baja California and western California to include the entire Pacific Coast, extending north to British Columbia and east to Arizona and Texas. Why the range expansion in this era of degraded and often declining habitat for many bird species? Anna's Hummingbirds have benefited from the cultivated, exotic plants that bloom all year long in our gardens and parks (the early-blooming mahonias at Washington Park Arboretum, for example,

are magnets for Anna's in the wintertime!), and from the widespread use of sugar-water feeders. Climate change may be a factor, too.

Another interesting aspect of the range expansion is that Anna's have become resident in the northern reaches of the range, such as the Seattle area. How does this tiny bird survive cold winters? Anna's and other hummingbirds are capable of going into a state of torpor. In this state, they lower their metabolism significantly

Some Nectar Plants for Attracting Anna's

Mahonia
Manzanita
Salvia
Penstemon

Fuchsia
Abelia
Ribes
Phlox

during cold temperatures, especially at night. They can adjust their internal thermostat from a normal daytime temperature range of 104–111 degrees F to 55 degrees F. They can also reduce their heartbeat even more dramatically—from an incredible high of 1250 beats per minute during flight and foraging to a normal resting rate of 250 per minute, all the way down to 50 beats per minute at torpor.

Named after Anna de Belle Massena, wife of the Duke of Rivoli, an amateur 19th century French ornithologist, Anna's are showy birds that vocalize more often than most hummingbirds. You can often hear the squeaky, raspy, song of the male in the treetops around Seattle and other Northwest cities. As the weather warms and brightens, Anna's males can be seen flying straight up into the air, then dropping precipitously and looping back up again, making a loud "chirp" noise at the bottom of their dive.

Anna's are mostly green and grey in color, but the males can be distinguished by the iridescent red plumage on their heads and necks. When light hits this plumage at the right angle, it flashes a spectacular bright magenta.

Anna's nests are hard to spot and amazingly compact. They are made of plant down and spider webs. Lichens are often used for camouflage. Hummingbirds are fiercely territorial around their food and nest, and Anna's are no exception. I once watched one depart from our backyard feeder to chase a Bald Eagle flying above our house. They seldom allow a second hummingbird to share our six-port feeder.

Having sufficient, reliable food is vital; hummingbirds can eat up to twice their body weight in nectar per day, along with numerous small insects or spiders. The many backyard feeders, seeming to multiply each year, provide lots of supplementary sugar water. (See "Feeder Recipe and Care" for tips on using a hummingbird feeder in your garden.)



Being a part of "Anna's World" is a great pleasure. These birds are worthy of their royal name. Look up to find a royal flash of color in the treetops where they perch and sing, and then search for them dipping their long bills into the tubular blossoms and the hummingbird feeders they frequent. ♪

Adapted from "Look Up: Birds and Other Natural Wonders Just Outside Your Window," a collection of essays by Woody Wheeler (Influence Publishing, 2014). Copies can be purchased online or in the Arboretum Shop.

WOODY WHEELER is a Master Birder, Certified Interpretive Guide, and owner of Conservation Catalyst, a birding and natural history firm. Connecting people to nature is his passion, and he does this through trips, classes and presentations, and by writing nature blogs on his website, www.conservationcatalyst.com.

Feeder Recipe *and* Care

To feed hummingbirds, you only need to mix sugar with water. No red dye is necessary. The basic recipe is one part sugar to four parts water. Boil the water first, then cool it. This will make the mix last longer without spoiling. If you want hummingbirds at your feeder on a regular basis, clean your feeder weekly throughout the year and twice a week during warm weather.

When it snows, or whenever temperatures dip below freezing at night, bring the feeder inside to thaw it out. You can bring it inside overnight and put it back out early in the morning. Anna's Hummingbirds are incredibly hungry during cold spells and sometimes will land on the feeder while you are holding it! In fact, if you don't keep the feeder filled and thawed all winter, the Anna's Hummingbirds that have been depending on it may starve.

ABOVE AND LEFT: Male Anna's Hummingbirds.