

UNUSUAL MORTALITY OF A MALE RUFIOUS HUMMINGBIRD IN BURTON, BRITISH COLUMBIA

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Like many residents throughout British Columbia, my wife and I enjoy the pleasure of feeding hummingbirds throughout the spring and summer seasons. So far, we have only been able to identify the Rufous Hummingbird (*Selasphorus rufus*) which frequents the lone feeder on our rural property in Burton, in the West Kootenay region of British Columbia. This acreage is forested with open spaces and gardens located at 455 m in elevation.

During the last week of August 2005, a single male and female Rufous Hummingbird were frequenting the feeder. On 29 August 2005 I found

the body of an adult male Rufous Hummingbird beneath the glass panel of the sliding door and about 2.4 m from the feeder. The head of a Bald-faced (White-faced) Hornet (*Dolichovespula maculata*) was stuck near the tip of the hummingbird's bill (Figure 1). Unable to open its bill to feed, it seems likely that the hummingbird perished as a result.

Male Rufous Hummingbirds exhibit tyrannical



Figure 1. Male Rufous Hummingbird with head of Bald-faced Hornet (*Dolichovespula maculata*) impaled on his bill at Burton, BC. 29 August 2005 (Arthur Schoeddert). BC Photo 3294.

behaviour at flowers and hummingbird feeders and it is possible that the bird attacked the wasp, thus impaling it on his bill. Birds use a “bill wiping” technique to remove excess food debris which may account for the fact that only the head of the wasp remained intact.

The Bald-faced Hornet occurs throughout southern Canada and is not a hornet at all but rather a large (> 15 mm) black and ivory yellow jacket. It is best known for its large gray football shaped paper nest. It mostly takes live prey such as flies and other insects, but also feeds on flower nectar. Wasps frequent hummingbird feeders. The male Rufous Hummingbird may have come into contact with the wasp at a flowering plant or while vigorously defending the feeder.

E. Jones (Calder 1993), who captured a female Rufous Hummingbird with a desiccated black wasp

impaled on, and firmly stuck to, her bill, suggested that a mid-air collision might have caused this unfortunate event. The bird had reduced her body mass to 3.1 g and was unable to open her bill until Jones snipped away the dried wasp.

In 1939, James Grant observed a Rufous Hummingbird suddenly utter a sharp squeak and drop from sight while feeding on flowers in a garden at Trinity Valley, British Columbia. The bird was lying belly down with wings half spread and a Black Hornet (*Vespula maculata*) with its mandibles working furiously between the bird's rectrices. The wasp fled and the hummingbird took flight. A second incident occurred with yellow jackets (*Vespula*, probably *arenaria*) preying on newly hatched Rufous Hummingbird young in a nest (Grant 1959).

This unusual incidence of hummingbird mortality in British Columbia is the first documentation that I can find in the technical literature.

Literature Cited

Calder, W.A. 1993. Rufous Hummingbird (*Selasphorus rufus*). In *The Birds of North America*, No. 53 (A. Poole and F. Gill, Eds.). The Birds of North America Inc., Philadelphia, PA. 20 pp.

Grant, J. 1959. Hummingbirds attacked by wasps. *Canadian Field-Naturalist* 73:174.

About the Author

Arthur spent his working years in Ontario and retired with his wife Christa to the rural landscape of British Columbia. He simply enjoys life!

“We are related, we are all one. The Indian acknowledges this and so discovers. The most liberating aspect of Native science: life renews, and all things which support life are renewable.”

Dr. Pam Colorado, Oneida 1989