

# Wisconsin's First Anna's Hummingbird

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*In November 1990 an Anna's Hummingbird was discovered in Wisconsin, a new addition to the state bird list. Details of its discovery and subsequent rescue are provided here.*

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*by Barbara Kranich*

My husband, Lee, and I had just fixed lunch for ourselves when a call came from Bob Adams. He was sitting by a big picture window at a home in Wales, Wisconsin, watching what he swore was an Anna's Hummingbird (*Calypte anna*). It was a mild day for late November— $-38^{\circ}$ —but much too late in the year for hummingbirds. Besides we *knew* that only Ruby-throated Hummingbirds were found east of the Mississippi River! But Bob was a birder with over half a century of experience and not likely to make a mistake identifying a bird.

“Get over here right away, with your camera!” Bob said. “We need a good picture to document this bird!”

Within 15 minutes we loaded camera bags, binoculars, and field guides into our van and were speeding to the David Schmidt house, a 20-minute drive from our home. Upon arrival, Susan Schmidt led us to the dining room which overlooked the bird feeders hanging throughout their backyard. Bob and his friend, Wilbur Riemer, pointed out a tiny nondescript wisp of greenish feathers perched low in a tree about 25 yards away, barely

visible through our 7×20's. Suddenly the bird darted toward the feeder some 12 feet in front of the window from where we watched. He made a few feints at the feeder, then hovered over it and began to feed. Several times he backed up a few inches, then reattached the tiny hole in the plastic flower to sip the sweet water. Transfixed, we saw the incredible iridescent rose-red feathers that covered the throat and extended over the forehead and crown. His bib was white, his belly, back, wings, and tail were green. He looked like he had flown off of page 187 of our field guide, *Birds of North America*. We watched his brilliant red throat and head blacken as he flew to the shady side of the feeder, then light up like a neon sign as he backed away into the sunlight.

During the next three hours, as Lee set up the camera equipment and took pictures (Figure 1), Susan told us the story of how the Anna's Hummingbird appeared one day in late August and had stayed to enjoy the bounty of their backyard and flower garden, especially the sugar water that Susan kept to attract ruby-throats.

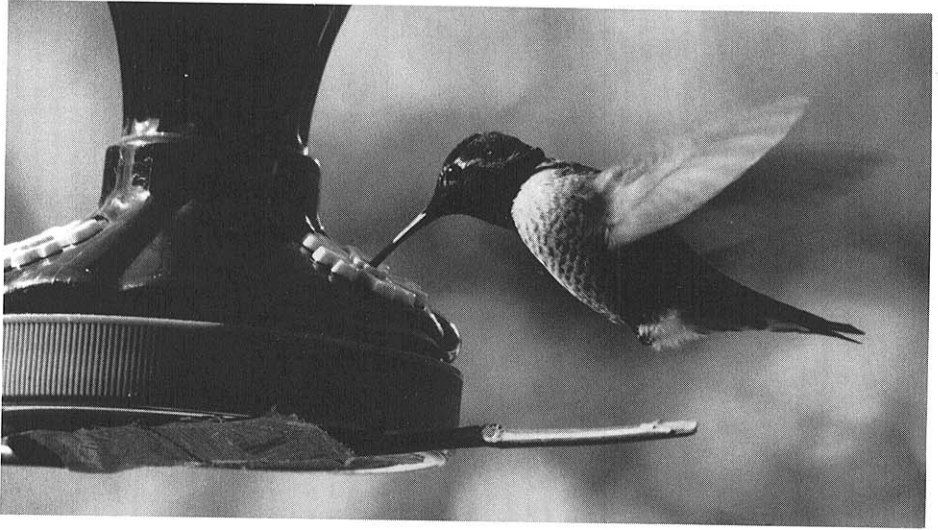


Figure 1. Wisconsin's first Anna's Hummingbird, photographed in Wales, Wisconsin, 28 November 1990 (photo by Lee Kranich).

"We thought he was just an odd looking ruby-throat," she explained. "We knew he looked like an Anna's, but couldn't be, since they were a western bird, and only ruby-throats were seen around here."

When the hummer didn't leave by October they became concerned, and finally, as the temperature dropped lower and lower, they called a nature center for advice. They were told to take the feeder down. So they did. Susan watched as the hummer searched in vain for the red feeder. As the day progressed the bird became so weak, that he lay listlessly in the nearby grass. Frantic, Sue hurriedly hung the feeder back up. Within a short time, as the hummer fed repeatedly, he regained his strength. But still he didn't migrate. Finally another call to the nature center resulted in a message relayed to Bob Adams who immediately drove over to the Schmidts', identified the bird, and called Lee. It was now November 29th.

The next day was Friday, and Dave Schmidt, a middle school teacher, and the five Schmidt children had all stayed home from school to become involved in what they now realized was an important event. Via Bob and Lee, word of the unique visitor had spread throughout the birders of Milwaukee and Waukesha counties, even as far west as the Madison area. By 8:30 A.M. the next morning eager birders were arriving at the Schmidts' house. By Friday night the news had hit the hotlines. Birders came from Illinois, Indiana, Minnesota, and all over Wisconsin.

Prompted by the Schmidts' deep concern for "their" hummer, we now all realized that the chances for this bird surviving a Wisconsin winter were close to nil. By Saturday Lee had begun calling other birders for their input. Letting "nature take its course," was unthinkable to the five Schmidt children, and a lot of adults agreed that something had to be done. Finally,

in a phone conversation with Noel Cwright, the solution came. Noel's wife, Kate Redmond, who was listening to Noel's side of the conversation suggested, "See if the Horticultural Domes in Milwaukee will take it. Better save the bird while you can than to leave it for someone's life list."

Lee hung up and placed another call, to Richard Risch, Administrator of the Milwaukee Domes. Mr. Risch was very enthusiastic and would be happy to accept the bird. He immediately began updating his information on the care and feeding of hummingbirds.

For three days Lee talked to banders and ornithologists throughout our area. Some were afraid the bird might die of shock or be injured if caught in a mist net. We didn't know where his night roost was, so we couldn't catch him in a torpid state, as some suggested.

At last, on Sunday evening, Lee was able to reach a bander who agreed to try to catch the bird. But time was running out. Although for two days the sunny weather had reached nearly 50°, warm enough to bring out insects for him to eat, a heavy snow was expected Sunday night. Worried, we went to bed to spend a mostly sleepless night listening to the near blizzard that raged outside. At 5 A.M. we arose, dressed warmly and eased our van out into mostly unplowed roads, with wind driven snow making almost a white-out of the visibility. Twelve inches of snow was predicted, and much of it had fallen. By 6:30 A.M. we were at the Schmidts'. Pat Heiden, the bander, arrived shortly after. Schools and businesses were closed and meetings were canceled, but three silly birders had struggled through the dark, snow-cov-

ered roads to try to rescue a bird that never should have been here in the first place.

Anxiously we awaited first light. Had the Anna's survived the night? As we watched, the bird came out of nowhere and went immediately to the feeder, behaving as though the blizzard was no more a problem than a summer shower.

Before any attempts to capture the bird, we needed permission from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to transport the hummer. We watched the bird and the clock until 8 A.M., opening time. Lee called Madison. No answer. One should not presume anything in a snow storm. Madison had even more snow than we did, and nothing was open.

Hopefully, Lee called the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service in the Twin Cities and reached a sympathetic ear. After assessing the situation, the law enforcement official gave Lee verbal permission to take the bird to the Domes. "In fact," she added, "Give me a call and let me know how the operation went."

Now we were armed with everything we needed—except the bird. For the next hour and a half Pat, Dave, and Lee positioned and repositioned two mist nets in an attempt to capture this sturdy little hummer. With rather obvious scorn, the Anna's would fly back and forth just in front of the nets, until seeing a clear route, he would buzz briskly over, around, or wherever he needed to go to reach the feeder. He would even perch on top of the nets. The trio of bird catchers slipping in the snow, trying to arrange 30 foot nets in a high wind, were fast being bested by a 3½ inch bird. Eventually, after draping one of the nets in a canopy fashion,

the three stalwarts came inside and watched until the hummer returned. Yelling "CHARGE," or something close to it, they rushed out of the house, startling the hummer into the net canopy. Unfortunately, the hummer was too too high in the net canopy for Pat to reach, so Dave lifted her up and she gently grasped the little bird. She slipped him into a small cloth bag and secured the opening. *Voilà!*, we had the bird.

Sue Schmidt phoned the Domes as we prepared to leave. Minutes later Lee and I were carefully negotiating the 30 odd miles to the Domes on roads that were worse than ever. But at least now it was light out. Afraid the hummer would get too warm, we refrained from using the heater.

It took nearly an hour to make the trip. I cradled the sack in my lap and talked to him softly whenever a few minutes elapsed without feeling him flutter. We really did not know if he would survive considering all he had been through.

Arriving at the Domes, we were escorted to the tropical room where the warm temperature and abundance of flowers and insects would (we hoped) remind the Anna's of its natural habitat in California. First we released him into a small cage for monitoring, but we soon realized that not only had he survived the trip, he was energetically trying to escape the cage. We opened the cage door and watched this little hummer escape joyfully into this tropical environment that now was to be his home. That was over a month ago. So far he seems to have adapted well to his limited but bountiful surroundings, is feeding on flowers, insects, and is red feeder.

One question still remains. How and when did a non-migrating bird usually found west of the Rocky Mountains, find its way to Wisconsin?

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Hairy Woodpecker by Michael James Riddet (Reprinted with permission of the artist and Hawkshead Ltd. Wildlife Art, Boscobel, WI 53805).