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Hummingbirds some lesser known facts

by Anthony J. Mobbs
English Aviculturist

The family Trochilidae is extremely diverse. Such attributes as plumage differences (some species are rather drab coloured whereas others have spectacular iridescent plumage and/or ornamentation) is well documented. However, certain attributes are not so well known and it is my intention to discuss some of these lesser known facts.

As I shall mention whether or not certain species under discussion can be established in captivity, I feel I should explain exactly what I mean by this. In my opinion a hummingbird cannot be considered established until it has undergone at least one full moult in captivity. The true character of a species often does not become apparent until it has been fully moulted. Once the moult is completed, many species which, up until then, have proven docile, may become extremely aggressive and remain so for the remainder of their lives. Certain species which have not been heard to sing will, after the crucial first moult, become vocal. Furthermore, many species, once established, may perform sexual displays hitherto not seen.

Not all species alter so dramatically after the first moult; indeed many easily managed hummingbirds, once they have settled into their quarters, will be heard to sing regularly and many will often display. Even so, the true character of such species may become more pronounced after the first full moult in captivity.

Beak Differences

The swordbill hummingbird (*Ensifera ensifera*) is unique not only because it has the longest beak of any hummingbird but also because, in relation to its body size, it has the longest beak of any bird.

It can be classified as an extremely difficult species to establish in captivity and, as far as I am aware, no one has ever succeeded. In the wild the species feeds almost exclusively on the flowers of *Datura* species, which are long and trumpet shaped.

When I attempted to establish a specimen, only the usual humming-

bird feeding tubes were available and, each time the bird fed, its tongue would be forced against the back of the tube. Over a period of three to four weeks the bird's tongue became bruised and eventually the swordbill ceased to feed regularly and shortly afterwards succumbed. I believe a special feeder has now been produced (in West Germany) which has the spout in the base of the feeder. This would enable a swordbill to feed in a more natural manner without the tongue touching any part of the feeder. Whether or not this has enabled a specimen to be established, I am unable to ascertain.

Due to the length of bill, the swordbill is unable to preen in the usual manner. Instead, the long claws are used for preening all but the tail and primaries. Because of this, the legs are longer and have more maneuverability than those of most hummingbirds. Although the beak is used for preening the tail and primaries, the bird is unable to preen each feather individually and the feathers can only be run through the centre of the beak.

It is amazing how well the bird's legs and feet are adapted for such work. Many species of hummingbirds use their claws for preening areas which cannot be reached with the beak, but no other species is able to preen the centre of the back and the vent feathers as does the swordbill.

The purple-backed thornbill (*Ramphomicron microrhynchum*) has the smallest beak of any hummingbird. It is a truly fantastic species, having great character, exceptional beauty and an unusual shape. Having large feet and claws and such a tiny beak, it is obvious that in the wild the species usually clings to the blooms from which it feeds. Those I have owned were never seen to hover for nectar and I always ensured they had a feeder placed next to a perch. The species is reasonably easy to establish and one male I owned was with me for three and a half years before it eventually died, presumably from old age.

Worthy of mention is the method

of feather replacement in this species in that, during the annual moult, the loss of old feathers (around the head and gorget mainly) occurs only after the feather follicle has been activated and the new feather is growing. This causes the moulting bird to take on a most bizarre appearance, with the old feathers sometimes covering the eyes completely before they are eventually shed.

This type of feather replacement occurs also in the Rivoli hummingbird (*Eugenes fulgens*) and the violet-fronted brilliant (*Heliodoxa leadbeateri*). It should be mentioned that this peculiarity is found only in the males.

The speckled hummingbird (*Adelomyia melanegenys*) and the piedtail (*Phlogophilus hemileucurus*) are two more species which prefer to feed while perched. Both are rather sombre coloured but have much character and are excellent additions to a collection. An attribute worthy of mention is the ability of both species to actually walk (and run) on the ground without appearing in any way awkward. In the United Kingdom the speckled is imported fairly regularly; the piedtail is very rarely brought in.

Perhaps the most bizarre beak of all is that of the sicklebill (*Eutoxeres*). Due to the extreme curvature, these birds have difficulty in feeding from a conventional style feeder. After numerous experiments I found that a feeding tube designed for sunbirds (with the spout tilting upwards at an angle of 45° and with a larger bore than that for hummingbirds) was ideal. If a conventional hummingbird feeder is used, each time the sicklebill feeds, the upper mandible is forced against the inside of the spout. This continual friction causes a callus to form. Unless a more suitable feeder is supplied, the callus will continue to develop and eventually the bird will cease to feed. Even after a callus has formed, if a suitable feeder is supplied the callus will quickly reduce in size and eventually slough.

Unfortunately this most interesting hummingbird is extremely difficult to keep alive in captivity for any length of time and I know of no one who has successfully established the species.

There are a number of hummingbird species in which the sexes are visually alike. It is possible to sex many of these by the size and/or shape of the beak. For instance, male violet-eared *Colibri* have a shorter and less curved bill than females. The

majority of *Phaethornis* (hermits) can be sexed in the same way. A further aid to sexing many of the hermits is by the length of tail as the two elongated feathers are shorter in the males. To use such methods would require comparison between a number of birds of the same species. Nevertheless, it is worth the effort if one wishes to obtain true pairs.

Eclipse Plumage

It is well known that in certain species of sunbirds the males have a non-breeding dress or eclipse plumage. What is not so well known is that the males of five species of hummingbirds also go through a period when they too have a non-breeding dress.

From my experience, none appear to remain in eclipse plumage for more than a few weeks each year. Why they should have a non-breeding plumage, especially as it is retained for such a short period (usually six to eight weeks), certainly requires further study.

Two of the starthroats (*Helio-master*) exhibit this phenomenon, namely the stripe-breasted (*H. squamosus*) and the blue-tufted (*H. furcifer*). The latter is extremely rare in captivity and only two people appear to have owned the species in the United Kingdom. I can find no records of the species having been kept in the States.

Ruschi (in Beija Flores, 1973) states that the blue-tufted "loses all its iridescent plumage, becoming very much like a female in appearance." If this were correct, then the blue-tufted would be unique among hummingbirds which have a non-breeding dress, as it would require an almost total moult to go out of colour so completely — a transformation no other species appears to undergo.

The stripe-breasted starthroat, when in eclipse plumage, has the crimson gorget replaced with feathers which are blackish edged with white. The glittering crown is replaced with dull grey with the remainder of the plumage as per normal for an adult male.

The amethyst woodstar (*Calliphlox amethystina*) is another species in which the male has a non-breeding dress. At certain times of the year (usually between August through September) the glittering feathers of the throat are replaced with whitish feathers heavily mottled with grey. Both the amethyst woodstar and the

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Though hummingbird beaks are normally thought of as being short and straight as this female, they have a great range in length (4" to 4.7", male and female, for the swordbill hummingbird and 0.2" for the purple-backed thornbill) and many are curved.

stripe-breasted starthroat are easily established species.

The Peruvian sheartail (*Thaumas-tura cora*) also has an eclipse plumage. Johnson (The Birds of Chile, Vol. II, 1967) describes how the male sheds the elongated tail feathers and the glittering rosy-violet feathers of the throat. Birds from the area where this species is found have only recently been appearing on importers' lists and, because of this, I have

Most hummingbirds like the red-tailed comet and long-tailed sylph (*Sappho sparganura*) are noted for their iridescent, gem-like tail feathers but only two hummingbirds, the great sapphirewing and purple-throated carib, are noted for their iridescent primary feathers.



Long-tailed sylph



Red-tailed comet

no experience with the species.

Both of the fairies (*Heliothryx*) as well as being rare in captivity are also extremely difficult to keep alive for any length of time. In the wild, *Heliothryx* pierce the base of the flowers from which they feed. Captive specimens, unless in a weakened state, feed on the wing. Due, no doubt, to their specialised feeding habits, I have found that birds from this genus prefer to feel the inside of the feeder spout against the bill. It is, therefore, advisable to supply a feeder which has a spout with a very small aperture, otherwise the birds will more than likely place the whole of the beak into the feeder, thus causing the nostrils to be continually covered with nectar.

Being extremely difficult species to establish (I know of no one who has been successful), it is not surprising I was, until recently, unaware that male

black-eared fairies (*H. aurita*) have an eclipse plumage. Ruschi (Birds of Brazil, Vol. IV and V, Hummingbirds, 1982) states that "at certain times of the year males lose entirely their iridescent plumage and become like adult females." As with the description of the eclipse plumage phase in *H. furcifer*, Ruschi mars this most interesting observation by giving what is obviously a brief general description of the phenomenon. It would, in fact, be impossible for a male to "become like a female" as the latter has a much longer tail than the male.

Iridescent Primaries

Only two species of hummingbird have this unusual feature, namely the great sapphirewing (*Pterophanes cyanopterus*) and the purple-throated carib (*Eulampis jugularis*). The former is a large hummingbird being next in size to the giant (*Patagona gigas*). It is extremely rare in captivity and, as far as I am aware, I am the only person in the United Kingdom to have owned a specimen. The bird I owned was male and although seemingly fit (it was seen to display regularly), it died after being with me for only 13 weeks. The wing coverts and primaries of the (male) great sapphirewing are, as its name implies, dark, shining blue.

The purple-throated carib has never been brought into the United Kingdom commercially and it is only through the generosity of the late Guy Detry (Belgium) that I am able to write on this species from personal experience. Detry gave me a female in 1972 and a male the following year. I found the species easy to establish and exceptionally long-lived. The New York Zoological Park kept a female alive for 10 years, 8 months, 6 days — surely a record for any hummingbird species.

The primaries are a beautiful iridescent green and are much more showy than those of the sapphirewing. Although I have many times observed the mating display in the carib and the sapphirewing, no prominence is given to the iridescent primaries during the display and I cannot even hazard a guess as to why the two species should have such an unusual feature.

The purple-throated carib is another species in which the sexes can be distinguished by the size and shape of the bill. Males have a shorter and less curved bill than the females. ●

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