

# Get Wild: Spring birds are here

Karn Stiegelmeier



**A broad-tailed hummingbird hangs in space for fraction of a second as it guards its food source.**

*Richard Seeley/Courtesy photo*

Yes, it has been a snowy May, with morning temperatures often well below freezing. Regardless, our beautiful osprey returned to their nests in early April. Mountain bluebirds also arrived in early April, and found some of their nesting boxes throughout the county. In past years, broad-tailed hummingbirds arrived around May 1. This year, I put out feeders on April 28 and was surprised to see hummingbirds on April 29, even with these cold temperatures. Because I don't want to attract bears or raccoons, I put the feeders out when I get up in the morning, and take them in when it is dark.

The broad-tailed hummingbird is all of 3 to 3.5 inches long and weighs 0.1- 0.2 ounces. How can they survive these temperatures in a Summit County May? The sugar water in my feeders helps, but they also have amazing abilities to survive in our cold weather by slowing down their metabolisms and going into torpor, which is like "hibernation lite," through a cold night. When they travel south to the tropics, they have to survive hot weather.

This tiny bird is iridescent green above with greenish or buff sides and a white chest and belly. Adult males have a magenta throat patch (gorget). Females have a plain, white-spotted throat. Their tails are "broad" when they take off and fly, but not while sitting on a feeder.

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All hummingbirds have tiny structures on their feathers that capture, bend and reflect sunlight, creating incredible color changes with small movements. The eye-catching feathers of males are thought to be successful in attracting mates, and these colorful changes have been passed down through time.

Hummingbirds are the only birds that fly backward and straight up and down. The males use fast, impressive flight, going as much as 100 feet up, then accelerating up to 50 mph down, flashing his bright magenta gorget toward a female.

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The rufous hummingbirds arrive later in the summer, and then behave very aggressively to find a mate and nest in the remaining summer.

While many birds have arrived, many more are still migrating. Could any of us find our way from a winter home to a summer home 3,000 miles away (without modern machinery and technology)? Many birds are killed by colliding with buildings as they are disoriented by human's lights. [Turning off your lights at night is one important way to help our birds.](#)

According to the Cornell Lab of Ornithology, we have lost 3 billion breeding adults, or 30% of bird populations in the last 50 years. Of course, habitat loss or pollution is a big cause, but everyday interactions you can control are also reasons for big declines.

Most of us have experienced birds hitting windows in our homes. Birds strike windows because reflective or transparent glass is invisible to them. Having insect screens on the outside of your windows is a big safety net. I have taped a construction paper cut-out of a “predator bird,” but have

found these window stickers from [WindowAlert.com](http://WindowAlert.com)

are much more effective.

Pet and feral cats are bird killers. A recent study by the Smithsonian Institution and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service estimates that domestic cats kill about 2.4 billion birds each year. Ideally, keep your cat as an indoor pet. If you insist on letting your cat outside, please include a noisy bell collar to give the birds a chance to get away.

We are so fortunate to have such amazing birds in our beautiful mountains. Let's be thankful and help our birds survive into the future.

**Karn Stiegelmeier is the immediate past Chair of Eagle Summit Wilderness Alliance, an all-volunteer nonprofit that helps the U.S. Forest Service protect and preserve the wilderness areas in Eagle and Summit**

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“Get Wild” publishes on Fridays in the Summit Daily News. Karn Stiegelmeier is a board member of Eagle Summit Wilderness Alliance, an all-volunteer nonprofit that helps the U.S. Forest Service protect and preserve the wilderness areas in Eagle and Summit counties. For more information, visit [EagleSummitWilderness.org](http://EagleSummitWilderness.org).  
Karn Stiegelmeier/Courtesy photo