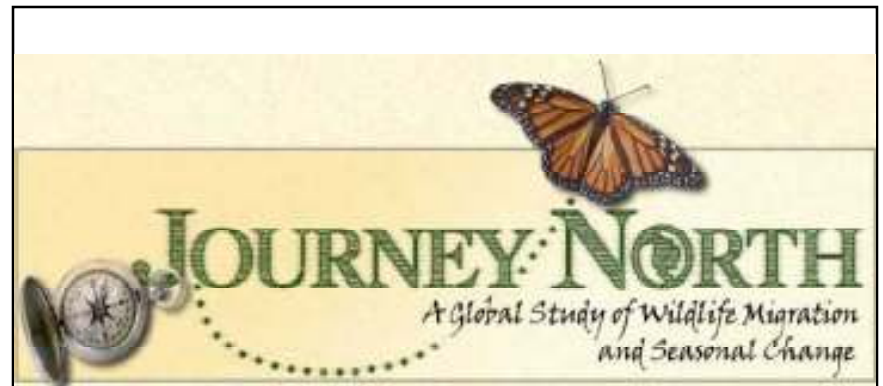




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## An Amazing Ruby-Throat Journey

by Eve Pranis

As Ruby-throated hummingbirds enter the United States from their wintering grounds, many hit Louisiana (and nearby Gulf states) first. And, boy, are they hungry! They've also just taken one of the riskiest trips of their lives . . .



For a long time, scientists didn't know how Ruby-throated hummingbirds got from their wintering grounds to the U.S. Gulf coast. These creatures weigh little more than a penny! Could they fly the 500 miles over the Gulf of Mexico with no food or rest? It didn't seem possible!

After all, a migrating hummingbird flaps its wings 75 times a second! It uses up energy so quickly that it needs to feed on flower nectar about every 15 minutes. Where would it find flowers or places to rest in the ocean?



But some observers — like you — reported each season's first Ruby-throats straight across the Gulf. So scientists investigated to see if these hummers *could* make the long trip across open water.

They knew that by early February, longer hours of sunlight trigger an urge in Ruby-throats. They stuff themselves with insects and tiny spiders!



Photo © Graham Matthews

*A creature from outer-space? No: Hummingbird food! This picture of a 1/4-inch-long aphid was taken under a microscope!*

All that eating builds up layers of fat on the back, belly, and throat. How fat *are* those hummers? They almost double their weight in about a week! (Can you imagine eating that many insects?)



Photo © P. Pratt

*Here a hummingbird bander blows on the chest feathers of a normal-weight bird. Through the thin clear skin, you can see whitish-yellow fat.*

Scientists also knew this:

- Fat energy lasts longer than sugar energy does.
- Hummers fly about 25 miles an hour — faster if they have winds behind them.
- The shortest point from the Yucatan (where Ruby-throats gather) to the U.S. (New Orleans, Louisiana) is about 500 miles.



Here's what scientists concluded:

Ruby-throats *do* build enough fat to fly at least 500 miles across the Gulf. Flying this shorter, more direct route could get them to their breeding territory even faster. But there's a tradeoff . . .

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Why is the Ruby-throat's journey so risky? Imagine this: A strong wind blowing from the north slows down a tiny hummingbird. The poor bird might use all its food energy before reaching land. (A wind of 26 miles per hour could even push it backward!)

Or a skinny, exhausted Ruby-throat might reach land, but not find any nectar sources nearby.

Not *all* Ruby-throats make this short, but tough, trip. Some head up through Texas, finding food along the way. But however they travel, hungry hummers will appreciate your nectar-filled feeders and flowers!



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