

Winging It

Arizona's Hummingbird Heaven

By Dennis G. Hanson Photographs by Rich Clarkson

"HOLD STILL!" In a whisper I described to my daughter the hummingbird that was hovering near her head.

Chelsea wore a scarlet headband, and, except for smiling, she held as still as any nine-year-old can. At her brow the diminutive feathered dynamo buzzed and flitted in search of nectar; it flew forward, backward, and sideways, testing the alluring headband with its long bill, its wings moving at about 30 strokes a second.

One moment the tiny hummingbird—its species poetically named the "magnificent"—hovered lusterless above Chelsea's ear. Then, twirling to face me, the bird flashed its royal purple crown and metallic green throat, and darted to her forehead.

No nectar here, it soon realized. Then, accelerating to full speed almost instantly, the hummingbird swept out of sight into the high canopy of pines. It was a moment that charmed and moved my daughter and me.

That brief encounter took place as we stood by a hummingbird feeder at Arizona's Mile Hi cabins. Nestled among giant sycamores and oaks, the Mile Hi is a small, well-managed hostelry located 90 miles from Tucson near the mouth of Ramsey Canyon. At 5,525 feet, it is the human nucleus of a preserve that totals 300 acres, all owned and managed by the Nature Conservancy, a national conservation group. For me, the Mile Hi is the quintessence of the quiet, rustic snugaway—no crowds or television, no noise except Ramsey Creek chattering outside our cabin.

The Mile Hi and the canyon preserve are set in a tortuous gorge carved into the northeastern flank of Arizona's Huachuca Mountains. Because of the area's natural setting—a mix of desert and mountain—it is a magnet for more species of the beguiling hummingbird than are seen anywhere else in the United States. Usually only one variety, the ruby-throated, can be seen in the East, but there are 15 western varieties, and Ramsey Canyon attracts most of them. I had long heard of the Ramsey Canyon Preserve as the "Hummingbird Capital of America."

Many of the birds spend the winter in Mexico

or Central America, then in spring follow the warm weather northward. At least six species breed in the canyon area; others pass through on the way to their breeding grounds. Because of the Huachucas' diversity of habitats, the birds gather here from April through September.

When I am at home near the Oregon Cascades, I am a ho-hum, sometime bird-watcher. But hummingbirds create their own passions in me and others. John James Audubon described a hummingbird as a "lovely little fragment of the rainbow." In other tongues and other places throughout the Western Hemisphere they have been given such lyrical names as "flower-kissers" and "rays of the sun."

For pure visual delight, there are few natural displays to equal the antics of hummingbirds. Those that flocked around the three dozen feeders scattered across the Mile Hi's grounds created a scene of natural madness. Here were dozens of tiny birds at a time—the bullies, the wheelers, the acrobats. One would buzz upward, sometimes touching another almost pugnaciously, then drop to hover at the feeder. Seeing the flash of a larger bird's charge, it would do what looked like a backward somersault and dart away.

Watching this chaos with us was Ernest Franzgrote, an engineer for the Jet Propulsion Laboratory in Pasadena and a fellow guest at the Mile Hi. The tall, soft-spoken Franzgrote knows something of elegant flight, having worked on one of the lunar landers. Whether identifying, studying, or photographing, he is an impassioned hummingbirder, and as each species came to a feeder, he ticked off its name: "A magnificent . . . a bluethroated . . . that's an Anna's." With his coaching, I tried to pick them out—by size, color, or behavior—but with little success. The birds can move so fast they are only a blur.

Franzgrote enchanted Chelsea by showing her a stroboscope he'd put together using pickup materials. The apparatus, a revolving disc with holes around the edge, exposed extremely brief, bright flashes of sunlight. When Chelsea synchronized the flashes with the hummingbird's wingbeats, the bird would appear

Suspended animation: An iridescent hummingbird hovers for midair refueling in Ramsey Canyon Preserve—a bird-watcher's haven, open to only a few visitors at a time, set on 300 acres in the Huachuca Mountains of southeastern Arizona.





Passing an abandoned homestead (right), Ramsey Creek flows through a periwinkle-carpeted forest kept cool and moist by the canyon's high elevation and shading walls. Mile Hi resort manager Debbie Collazo (above) makes this lush spot more attractive to hummingbirds by filling sugar-water feeders where they come by the hundreds to satisfy their appetites—and those of hummingbird fans (below).



to float on motionless wings. Franzgrote then showed her that some species flutter faster than others, with 20 to 60 wingbeats a second.

He spotted a small queen perched near her throne—a female blue-throated hummingbird watching over a nest no bigger than half a tennis ball. Built of twigs, moss, and purloined, sheeny spiderwebs, the nest was installed beneath the derelict eaves of an old cabin, and it escaped us until Franzgrote carefully pointed it out. We watched as two tiny black bills, attached to naked crowns, waved clumsily over the lip of the nest. The mother bird stood guard, warning us occasionally with a loud, piercing *seep* while fanning her splendid black-and-white tail.

A full-grown hummingbird, she weighed about a quarter ounce—a fraction of the weight of an ordinary letter. Inside that tiny body was a heart that can beat close to 1,200 times a minute, so fast that through a stethoscope it would sound like a bumblebee. A hum-



mingbird has to spend many of its waking hours gathering food, since it must consume about half its weight in sugar each day, plus several times its weight in water, just to keep the inner fire burning. With a relative brain size that is among the largest of all birds', it is capable of remarkable acrobatic flight and long-distance navigation. Its only disadvantage is not being able to soar on motionless wings for more than a short distance.

But these are details. Everywhere it appears, the hummingbird takes center stage as a lively personality, a featured entertainer in the natural world, and it receives top billing in Ramsey Canyon. But the Nature Conservancy also likes to emphasize the broader aspects of the area, where the almost untouched terrain is a particularly good home for wild things.

To see more of the local birds and animals, we sought out Tom Collazo and his wife, Debbie, the preserve's earnest managers. Tom asked us to join him



and a few other guests for a walk up the Box Canyon Trail into the heart of the preserve. Our destination was about a quarter mile up the canyon, where the preserve merges into the Forest Service's 20,190-acre Miller Peak Wilderness Area. Here the quartzite canyon walls form a twisted gorge called the Box. The creek has carved a deep channel, just wide enough for the torrents from summer rains to tumble through.

Up the canyon, Tom led us past a century-old orchard, its trees gnarly and untended; locals say it once supplied apples for towns as far away as Phoenix. Then the easy trail ran along the bank of Ramsey Creek. Arizona sycamores, some as tall as 90 feet, lined the moist banks, and birds of varying sizes broke through the leafy canopy as we walked.

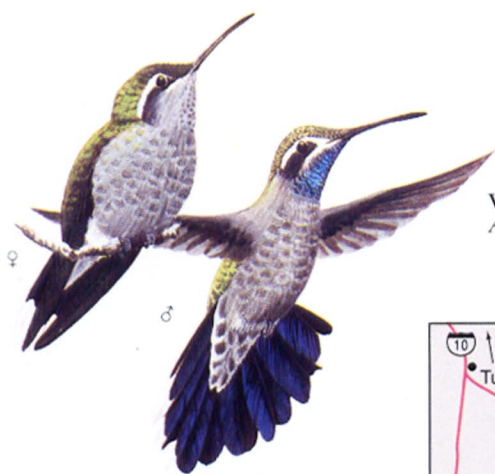
Binoculars up.

From the top of a sycamore, a pair of flickers—a dun-colored youngster imitating its parent wingbeat for wingbeat—fluttered 200 yards up the trail to an un-

seen perch. Next, binoculars swung to the bushes along the creek as half a dozen yellow-eyed juncos bumped and swayed the branches. A gray squirrel raced away in short, squealing dashes.

We followed musical Ramsey Creek, which is fed by springs that cascade down in a series of gentle steps. Close to the water was a soaring Apache pine with feathery needles. This was truly an oasis—greenery in the middle of a desert that is bone-dry most of the year. Up a sun-struck hillside we saw invaders from that realm: yucca, agave, and blooming prickly pear cactus.

The Huachuca range is one of a series of "mountain islands," so called because they rise out of the surrounding sunbaked ocean of the desert. Its water-gathering peaks climb to almost 10,000 feet. This meeting of altitude and latitude creates a living contradiction: subtropical species jammed side by side with those from deserts, prairies, and mountains. Our



Blue-throated Hummingbird
Lampornis clemenciae



Black-chinned Hummingbird
Archilochus alexandri



Rufous Hummingbird
Selasphorus rufus



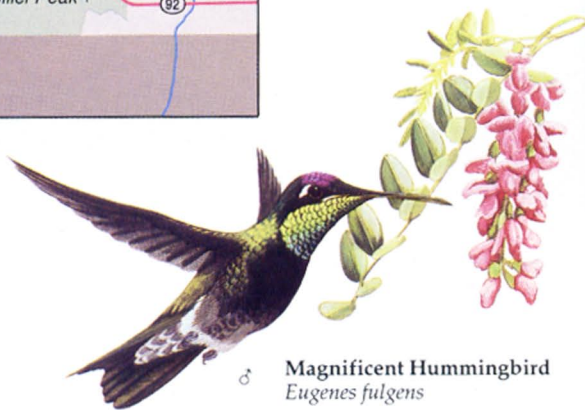
Violet-crowned Hummingbird
Amazilia violiceps



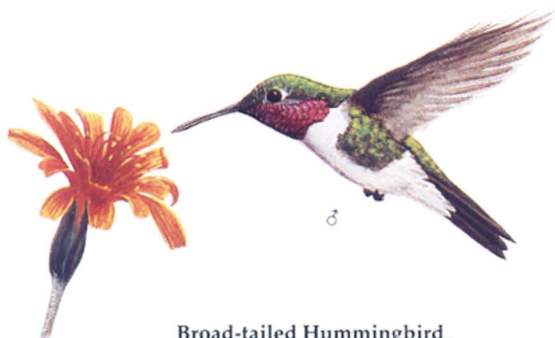
Anna's Hummingbird
Calypte anna



Broad-billed Hummingbird
Cynanthus latirostris



Magnificent Hummingbird
Eugenes fulgens



Broad-tailed Hummingbird
Selasphorus platycercus



group that day walked up-canyon through enough different environments to mimic a border-to-border stroll, south to north, from Mexico to Canada.

Given more than a few days in the area of the Huachucas, and much more patience and skill than I will ever be blessed with, I could have counted fully one-quarter of all the bird species that reproduce in North America, everything from golden eagles to roadrunners. Communities of mammals (more than 70 species, ranging from mountain lions to bats), plants, insects, and reptiles are similarly varied.

The mountainsides above us were once also the territory of nomadic hunters, Apaches who crisscrossed the ridges to find game. I suppose they must have particularly delighted in the canyon's hummingbirds, since these glittering creatures were considered good omens.

The great Chiricahua Apache leaders held European newcomers at bay for almost three centuries, and because of the area's isolation and steep, chaparral-choked terrain, it was never occupied regularly by the Anglos until the 1870s. Then in 1922 N. C. Bledsoe came along. A physician from Bisbee, Arizona, he inherited a chunk of Ramsey Canyon acreage from a patient. Bledsoe owned most of the canyon's creekside land, and he removed the remains of about 30 tin-roofed homesteader houses along the banks, intending to guard both his privacy and the area's special nature. With his holdings protected by a devoted caretaker who sometimes discouraged trespassers at muzzle point, Bledsoe preserved the land and, before his death in 1974, arranged to pass it along in perpetuity to the Nature Conservancy.

The quiet reserve he created encourages dawdling. I found myself slowing down to a kind of half-walk, and our group's pace became almost dreamlike, as if we were floating down an easy river on a hot day.

We crossed a log bridge over Ramsey Creek, careful not to step on two trumpet-shaped lemon lilies, flowers not often found growing in the wild. Everything around us in this boggy area—lilies, grass, bushes—was carpeted with hundreds of butterflies. Here were swallowtails, skippers, satyrs, and others I couldn't hope to identify. In 1983 the Ramsey Canyon area recorded the greatest concentration of species in the United States—96 at midsummer. As I sat down on a rock, I gently brushed the butterflies away so as not to harm any. For the next few minutes I became a landing pad, delicately massaged by the butterflies' colorful wings.

Back on the trail Chelsea and I traded observations about what we saw—a juniper root hanging over

the canyon, contorted by erosion and extreme weather; a red-orange hepatic tanager flitting through the forest; mixed seeds of milkweed and desert wildflowers riding away on the wind.

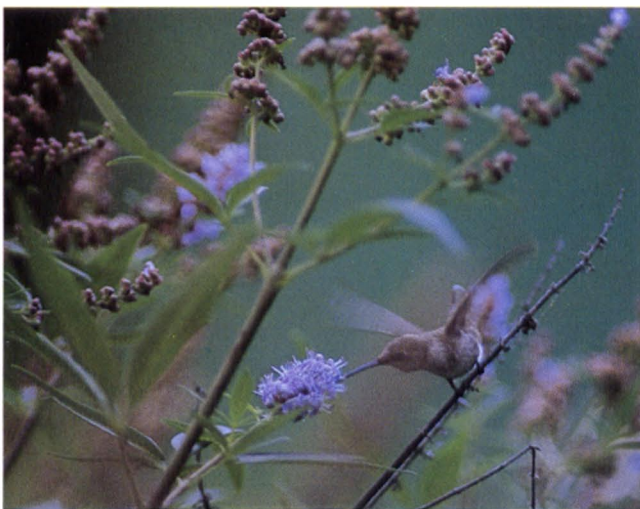
Co-ah, co-ah, co-ah.

The series of coarse, low notes emanated from up a ravine, from somewhere in the Apache pines. The source of the sound was an elegant trogon, the subject

Hiker takes the route less traveled (below), clambering through the narrow-walled "Box" in Ramsey Canyon—just one gorgeous diversion in the preserve area (map, opposite), whose habitats attract many varieties of hummingbirds.



Beautiful and spacious skies: Summer rain clouds rise above the Sierra de San José and a vast desert grassland (right). Showers help create the oasis of Ramsey Canyon, where plants such as this vitex bloom (below), much to the delight of a peckish hummingbird.



of fascination, even fanaticism, among some bird-watchers in the canyon. Our group silently surveyed the forest to catch sight of the bronze green head and bright rose red belly of this bird, which appears to have been designed by a committee that just couldn't agree on anything.

Unable to spot the quarry, one member of our group set off up the trail in pursuit. He had been at the Mile Hi three days without seeing a trogon. It was on his list. I yelled after him to ask if he'd be rejoining us. He didn't promise. He *had* to see that bird.

The passions of any hobby can be all-consuming, and bird-watching is no different. When a flame-colored tanager, a Mexican bird not seen in the U. S., showed up to nest in Cave Creek Canyon in the nearby Chiricahua Mountains, word of its appearance created a stampede; several hundred people and a crew from the "Today Show" poured into the confined canyon.

Like a fisherman who needn't actually *catch* fish to enjoy the experience, I didn't have to see the trogon. So we walked on up the canyon. The sunlight spilled over us, across the peaks, turning blues and

grays to burnt desert reds. The several worlds above and below us ran together. Here was the very heart of the canyon, the essence of the Huachucas.

A golden eagle silently traced the rim of Sentinel Peak, then, lightly as a leaf, drifted down-canyon through the still air. The unseen trogon called again, this time up a thick, thorny draw. Lonely, piping calls—canyon tree frogs—rose in a crescendo. And below us several small Sonoran white-tailed deer made a crackling exit from the woods.

Our group turned back, heading for a cool evening at the Mile Hi. Just then, a small blur flashed past Chelsea's head. She ducked instinctively, and the bird landed on a nearby tree. A smile of joy lit up Chelsea's face. "It's a blue-throated hummingbird!" she cried. She was right. It was a good omen. □

Dennis G. Hanson, a free-lance writer from Bend, Oregon, and former senior editor of *Audubon*, reports he's most at home when writing about the out-of-doors.

Rich Clarkson is the National Geographic Society's director of photography and has been a frequent contributor to *Sports Illustrated*.



Travel • Wise

The listings below are provided as a service to TRAVELER readers and are not intended as recommendations. The & symbol indicates that entrances and rest rooms are accessible to wheelchairs. All information is accurate as of press time. It is, however, subject to change.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

Write or call the Mile Hi/Ramsey Canyon Preserve, R.R. 1, Box 84, Hereford, Ariz. 85615; (602) 378-2785. For information about the surrounding area, write or call the Sierra Vista Chamber of Commerce, 77 Calle Portal, Suite A-140, Sierra Vista, Ariz. 85635; (602) 458-6940. Note: All telephone numbers below have a 602 area code, and all addresses are Sierra Vista, Ariz. 85635.

HOW TO GET THERE

By air To Tucson International Airport (90 mi. northwest of Ramsey Canyon).

By Amtrak To Tucson from Chicago, New Orleans, or Los Angeles.

By bus From Tucson by Greyhound or Trail-

ways to Sierra Vista (10 mi. from Ramsey Canyon).

By car From Tucson, take I-10 east and Ariz. Hwy. 90 south to Sierra Vista. Pick up Ariz. Hwy. 92 east of Sierra Vista and go south 10 mi. to the Ramsey Canyon turnoff. Turn right and drive 4 mi. to the Mile Hi cabins.

VISITING RAMSEY CANYON PRESERVE

Warning: The preserve is small, and access is limited. Although day visitors are welcome 8 a.m.-5 p.m., only 8 parking spaces are available, and the overflow must be turned away. No RVs or large vehicles can be accommodated. Weekday visits are recommended; there are fewer visitors then. Hiking is by permit only, and no picnicking or pets are allowed. Such restrictions are set by the Arizona Nature Conservancy to insure the survival of plants and animals in Ramsey Canyon.

PLACES TO STAY

The Mile Hi resort has 6 cabins with kitchens and a total capacity of 24 guests. Rates are \$48 for the first 2 people in a cabin, \$8 for each additional person; weekly rates are available. Reservations should be made well in advance

for the busy period from April through Aug.

The accommodations listed below, all in Sierra Vista, are classified **Budget** (\$45 or less for a double room).

BEST WESTERN-THUNDER MOUNTAIN INN 1631 S. Hwy. 92; 458-7900 & (B)

CLOUD 9 MOTEL 5500 E. Hwy. 90; 458-7820 (B)

MOTEL 6 1551 E. Fry Blvd.; 459-0666 (B)

VILLAGE INN MOTEL 2440 E. Fry Blvd.; 458-4315 & (B)

VISTA INN 201 W. Fry Blvd.; 458-6711 (B)

WESTERN MOTEL 43 W. Fry Blvd.; 458-4303 (B)

PLACES TO EAT

The restaurants below, all in Sierra Vista, are classified **Budget** (\$10 or less per person for dinner, excluding alcoholic beverages), **Moderate** (\$11-25).

BEEF BARON 21 Fab Ave.; 459-2715 (B)

EDDIE'S (Mexican) 296 W. Fry Blvd.; 458-6569 (B)

LA CASITA (Mexican) 465 W. Fry Blvd.; 458-2376 (B)

ORIENT EXPRESS (Chinese/Japanese) 1173 E. Fry Blvd.; 459-2777 (B)

PEKING (Chinese) 1481 E. Fry Blvd.; 459-0404 (B)

AGOSTINO'S ITALIAN CUISINE 4907 S. Hwy. 92; 378-2665 & (M)

CAÑON RESTAURANT (Steaks) Apache Pointe Ranch, Ramsey Canyon Rd. and Richards Rd.; 378-6800 (M)