

Kerrville Daily Times

Expect the Unexpected

by **Bill Lindemann**

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Over the past few weeks I have written about the unusual summer, and year, in which we have experienced drought conditions. It is not the last drought we will face, but I think all of us are ready for nature to change course, particularly our wildlife. Our vegetation growth is at a standstill and ponds and creeks are drying up, forcing our wildlife to travel further to find enough food and water to survive. These conditions impact all wildlife in the stricken areas, birds, mammals, insects, reptiles and fish.

The food chain that drives survival is placed in jeopardy as wildlife are forced to eat what they can find. Gardeners know there are plants that deer normally shun because they either taste bad or are toxic – maybe both. When food resources disappear, the animals are forced to eat what they can find; taste becomes less relevant. Members of the salvia (sage) family are examples of plants that do not taste good to mammals, but salvia plants are on the current menu.

Examples of toxic foods normally avoided by birds are the exotic plants, chinaberry and nandina. In years when our native Ashe juniper has low berry production, birds such as Cedar Waxwings, thrushes, and Northern Mockingbirds will sometimes eat these berries. The berries are not toxic enough to cause death with limited consumption; however, continued use can be fatal to the birds.

Hummingbirds depend on flower nectar and small flying insects to supplement their diet with necessary essential nutrients. Both flowers and insects are impacted by the lack of rainfall. Our tiny friends are invading our feeders in record numbers this year. At the moment, I am feeding about a half-gallon of sugar water a day. In past years, I doubt that I dispensed that much sugar water in two weeks. With the young fledging, the numbers are going to rise regarding sugar water consumption.

Hummingbirds tend to wander after they finish their breeding activities. Many of us who feed hummingbirds have had a Pacific Northwest breeder, the Rufous Hummingbird, invade our feeders at the end of July. These super aggressive birds will try to dominate the feeders while they are here. I think they will find the situation a little different this year because our thirsty hummers will challenge the visitor's attempt to take over the feeders. I see birds this summer who are much less domineering.

Many hummingbirds return to the tropics though the mountainous Trans-Pecos region which gets most of its year's rain during the summer monsoon season. With the jet stream seemingly parked to the north of Texas, desperate times could be in store for that part of Texas as well. My friends in the Big Bend area received their last significant rain last August. Conditions are dire at the moment regarding the area's plant and flower production.

One hummingbird that is fairly common in mid to late summer in the Chisos Mountains of Big Bend National Park is the Lucifer Hummingbird. The male has an outstanding lavender/purple gorget and the species possesses a slightly de-curved bill, the only such bill north of the tropics. I know that two of these birds have been seen in the Hill Country (Junction and Utopia) recently. Check your feeders for this beauty. Broad-tailed Hummingbirds, with their whistling wings and red gorgets may also visit our area this summer.

Birds have the advantage to use their wings to move to areas with better food resources, so be on the lookout for some unexpected visitors throughout the remaining part of the year. It is not because we have the food they are seeking, but because they will be passing through the area while conducting their search. Please keep your hummingbird feeders filled and keep close tabs on your visitors – a special bird may be among your guests.