

Mystery hummingbird's species identified

December 26 2011, By Bridget Doyle

A mystery that puzzled Chicago-area birders was solved when Field Museum scientists identified the unusual hummingbird living in an Oak Park, Ill., yard as a member of the rufous species rarely seen in the Midwest.

Josh Engel, a staff scientist at the Field Museum in Chicago, said he and Vernon Kleen, a hummingbird bander from Springfield, Ill., recently visited the Oak Park home to take [DNA samples](#) from the bird.

Kleen took measurements and pulled two [tail feathers](#) to capture [skin cells](#) and extract the DNA, Engel said.

The results indicate the bird is female and a rufous, not a broad-tailed or hybrid as many speculated, he said.

"In Illinois, only about one or two rufous hummingbirds are seen each year," Engel said. "But in the last 20 years or so, more and more hummingbirds typical of the Western U.S. are showing up in the East and the Midwest. It probably has a lot to do with the number of hummingbird feeders popping up. The birds find a feeder and stick to it."

Engel said the bird's chances of surviving depend on how winter plays out.

Homeowner Eric Gyllenhaal, who discovered the bird using the feeder at his home, said he will continue to provide the sugar water and nutrients

to "fatten her up," hoping she will then migrate south. The Gyllenhaals also put a heater next to the [hummingbird](#) feeder to keep the [sugar water](#) from freezing overnight.

"Rufous are a very tolerant species. They're tough little birds," Gyllenhaal said. "Knowing what we know about the [birds](#) returning to the same place every winter, we have high hopes this one will maybe come back next winter."

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