

## Hummingbird Fun Facts #2

By Kay Lookingbill

Gulf Coast Bird Observatory Note: We asked expert bird bander, Kay Lookingbill, if we could compile some of her wonderful fun hummer facts from her Facebook posts and pass them on to all of you, and she happily agreed! So here is article number 2 of hummingbird fun facts... in no particular order. Thank you, Kay! Watch for more next week! -Martin Hagne, Executive Director, GCBO

### How long do hummingbirds live?

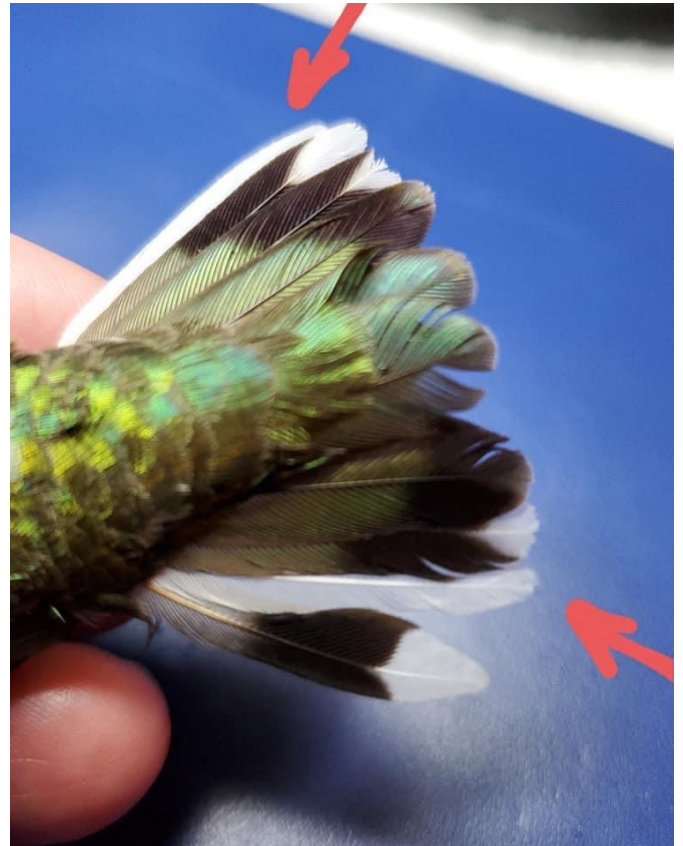
The oldest known wild hummingbird was a Broad-tailed hummingbird in Colorado, who lived 12 years, and 2 months. The oldest known Black-chinned hummingbird was 11 years, 2 months in Texas, and the oldest Ruby-throat was 9 years, 2 months in West Virginia. Coincidentally, all 3 of these birds were females. Of course, it is likely that there are individuals out there that we don't know about, that have surpassed these records. Most hummingbirds do not live as long as the ones listed above. Just like any wild animal, their first year is tough. But if they survive their first year, many hummingbirds live to 5 years or more.

### Why are some of their feathers white?

Sometimes hummingbird feathers are completely white, meaning that the feather has no pigment or iridescence. There is so much that is unknown about this phenomenon and nobody fully understands what causes it. Theories include heredity, poor health, poor diet or environmental stress when molting, or aging, or a combination of these (or other unidentified factors). There is also disagreement on what to call it. Most sources label it "partial albinism", some call it "leucism" (although leucism is usually defined as a reduced pigment, whereas albinism is the complete lack of pigment). It is also unclear what will happen in the next molt cycle when these feathers are replaced. Will the new feathers be white or normal color? Will there be more or fewer white feathers? One thing that is clear, though, is that these white feathers are weaker, and wear faster. This is a disadvantage to the bird since it reduces maneuverability in flight, and reduces insulation properties. There is so much more for us to learn!

### Why band birds?

Bird banding is a scientific method of doing field research on wild birds. Researchers place metal or plastic bands around a bird's leg. The band is tight enough that it doesn't fall off, and loose enough that it doesn't hurt the bird. Each band has a unique number on it, which allows us to identify individuals. We learn things like how long they live, survival rates, migration routes, and which locations and habitats are critical to their survival. We also learn how human disturbance affects different species, and so much more. This data is then used to develop and implement wise conservation policies that are



effective and fiscally responsible. The more we know, the better we can do! Each hummingbird band has a letter and a five digit number on it! The hummingbird bands are aluminum, very light weight, and don't affect the bird's ability to perch or fly.

Photo Caption: It is unclear why some hummingbird feathers are completely white. Photo by Kay Lookingbill.