

How Cam and Joy Finlay Started the Hummingbird Project

by Jannaca Chick

The Hummingbird Project had its humble beginnings in 1996 as a personal experiment in banding and tracking Rufous Hummingbirds (*Selasphorus rufus*) in Victoria, BC, thanks to the curiosity and interest of Cam Finlay.

At that point little was known about Rufous Hummingbirds, particularly what went on in their breeding grounds in the Pacific Northwest. These tiny birds travel between 2,000 – 4,000 miles one way – from where they overwinter in Mexico and the Gulf States up the west coast to their breeding grounds along the western edge of North America, some traveling as far north as southeastern Alaska. They migrate the greatest distance and nest further north than any other hummingbird species.

Retired biologist and bird bander, Cam Finlay had recently moved from Alberta to his retirement home on the outskirts of Victoria. He had become curious about the great numbers of Rufous Hummingbirds that appeared at his feeders in the spring. Cam started off his career as a geologist in Edmonton Alberta, but deciding to follow his passion, he returned to university to get his Master's degree in biology, and specialized in the study of Purple Martins. He worked as one of the original national park rangers in Canada at Elk Island National Park 35 miles east of Edmonton and then went on to develop an outdoor historical museum, Fort Edmonton Park.

Cam and his wife Joy, a celebrated environmental educator who was awarded the Order of Canada for her work, knew they wanted to retire in Victoria BC, so they bought property and built a house on the outskirts of the city. The person who was the caretaker of their home prior to their retirement had set up hummingbird feeders which attracted large numbers of Rufous Hummingbirds every spring. Once Cam had permanently moved to Victoria, it wasn't long before he became curious about these beautiful visitors.

In 1996 Joy Finlay happened to read a magazine article about a woman named Betty McGinnis who had been banding hummingbirds in Fanny Bay, one hour north of Nanaimo. This article piqued Cam's interest and he decided to get in touch with her. Betty McGinnis was working on her doctorate on hummingbirds at UBC, but had since moved to Seattle. He contacted Betty and invited her to come up to Victoria to show him how to band hummingbirds. This seemed a logical step for someone who already had his banding permit, was an avid birder and naturalist, and had great numbers of hummingbirds coming to his own home every year. At this point in time Cam wasn't convinced that he personally wanted to tackle banding these tiny birds so he invited some birding friends to attend the demonstration.

Betty arrived and showed Cam how to set up her hummingbird trap. In those days it was a large box with a screen and a feeder inside it – quite different from what is used today. As soon as the trap was set, the hummingbirds immediately began coming in to feed. Betty merely reached inside the box, gently grasped a bird and then proceeded to band it. After only a couple of hours she had banded about 50 birds! Having another engagement, Betty left them to continue banding the hummingbirds.

Jeff Holroyd, a friend of Cam's, who was there that day, was so inspired he suggested they get up early the following morning and carry on banding more hummingbirds. He woke Cam up early, they set up the trap, put all the banding paraphernalia on the kitchen table, and within two hours they had again banded 50 or so birds. When Joy got up she was alarmed to see they were bringing the birds into the house to band, fearing that if one escaped that have a difficult time catching it inside the house. So, wisely listening to her advice, they moved their operations outside.

After catching and banding so many birds in only two days, Cam was hooked. As a scientist, he knew that banding these birds could valuable data and information about their migration, life cycle, and breeding habits. Cam slowly started banding at different locations in the Greater Victoria area. Tom Gillespie, who was affiliated with Rocky Point Bird Observatory and the Purple Martin reintroduction project, introduced Cam to people who had Anna's Hummingbirds in their yards. So Cam began to band this species as well. Ann Scarfe, who was working at the Swan Lake Nature Centre at that time, helped him out with conducting banding operations there. Through his work at Swan Lake Cam was able to show that Anna's Hummingbirds breed and nest more than once a year in Victoria.

For the next few years Cam continued banding hummingbirds around the Greater Victoria area. Then a woman named Betty Kennedy from Galiano Island contacted him and suggested that he come to her place to band hummingbirds there. He was astonished at the numbers of birds that were attracted to her feeders. Then another person on Gabriola Island got in touch with him about banding there. Before he knew it he was getting offers from people on various Gulf Islands to come and band, and slowly his banding operations began to expand. Over a period of several years he noticed he was getting multiple recaptures of hummingbirds, and often very close to the date they were originally banded. It started to become apparent that these birds were extremely "site loyal" to a particular location, and they returned each year at the same time.

After several years Cam began to think it would be a good idea to set up a network of hummingbird banders across BC, so that an understanding of hummingbird migration and breeding could be better monitored throughout the province. He got in contact with BC Nature and also wrote articles that appeared in various newspapers throughout the province. He was looking for interested participants who had a lot of hummingbirds coming to their yards and feeders. Many people contacted him as a result – not necessarily scientists, but people dedicated to observing and feeding the birds in their area. He began travelling to various places around BC, at first setting up a banding station and demonstrating how he banded hummingbirds. Eventually he began training people in the banding process until he had over fifty people banding under sub-permits. Before he knew it, he was travelling around the province giving talks and making sure the various banding stations were running smoothly. He went as far north as Dunster and Quesnel, getting people involved. His project even extended into Alberta. Throughout all this time Cam's wife Joy accompanied and assisted him in banding operations and expanding the banding network. On their fiftieth anniversary, they were banding hummingbirds in Alberta!

At a certain point Cam realized that before this project became too much for him to maintain he needed to find a successor. At this point as the master bander, everything had to go through him.

It had become a large project which required a lot of work and organization. About a year after Cam had begun banding hummingbirds, Alison Moran, a molecular biologist, joined him and became quite involved. Over the years she and her husband Jon had become a regular participants. Cam approached Alison in the hope she would take on this valuable project and she accepted. Cam and Joy “held Alison’s hand” and the takeover happened organically, so that Cam could retire and be confident that his project had been handed over to a worthy successor.

Alison’s husband Jon became involved in doing isotope studies on the feathers of Rufous Hummingbirds. Through his work it was discovered that males and females overwinter at different altitudes.

The Hummingbird Project evolved organically over a period of many years, having begun as a personal interest venture. Cam and Joy took the initiative to get this project off the ground, at a time when very little was known about hummingbirds in the province. No one had initiated any study on hummingbirds in BC on such a scale. He had the necessary scientific background, impetus and interest, plus the ability to get people involved and organized. A project like this is by no means a one man job, it requires team work and dedication. Funds started coming in to support the project as well, although many expenditures came out of the Finlays’ own pockets. It had become obvious that valuable data and information was being recorded and accumulated through years of banding hummingbirds.

Hummingbirds are a very charismatic species that capture people’s interest – their extraordinary beauty, fascinating physiology, their migration patterns, breeding habits, and their pollination of plants in different ecosystems. So many people became engaged and involved in the Hummingbird Project and continue to participate to this day.

People may ask why it is necessary to band hummingbirds. Observation alone cannot provide the data necessary to gain a greater understanding of the lives of these birds, along their impact on the environment and vice versa. Until this project began no one knew that the same migrating hummingbird returns year after year to the same breeding grounds. Two Rufous Hummingbirds from one site in North Vancouver were banded and recaptured enough times to determine they were at least nine years old – that means a trip to Mexico and back nine times! On Galiano Island birds that were banded as adults were recaptured several times to show that they were over nine years old. This is a bird about three inches in length and weighing an average of 3.22 grams for males and 3.41 for females. An extraordinary migration feat for such a tiny bird!

Previously nothing had been known about Rufous Hummingbirds on their breeding grounds until Cam began banded them in British Columbia. No one knew about, much less tracked, their site fidelity on their breeding grounds. Even though the protocol is to band hummingbirds every two weeks, the recapture rates in the spring is 30-40% when the birds are coming through. Banded birds are often recaptured on or close to the same day they were first banded and in the same sequential band order. It is believed that no other avian species shows such a high percentage of recapture at the same sites. This would never have been realized without many years of banding and collection of data. Cam was able to show that females on eggs develop “swollen” legs which provide warmth to incubate eggs and nurture chicks, rather than the brood patch of other bird species. No one had seen or documented this prior to Cam’s project.

The Hummingbird Project carries on with banding stations in various locations in BC and Alberta– the Capital Regional District, Princeton, Vernon, Rossland, Lumby, Soda Creek, Quesnel, Ft. St James, Kaleden, Kananaskis, etc. The Project now bands and monitors four of the species of hummingbirds that appear in BC – Anna’s, Rufous, Calliope, and Black-chinned. All of this work is done by dedicated teams of volunteers. Valuable data continues to be collected and knowledge about these birds is enhanced as a result. This is a wonderful example of scientists working in collaboration with interested citizens. Hummingbirds are warm-blooded pollinators and their contribution may be essential to survival of the ecosystem. Habitat loss and global warming are likely to have an effect on the flowering pattern that the birds rely on as they travel up and down the continent. Climate change could disrupt the wave of flowering plants that the hummingbirds follow and compromise their ability to migrate and breed successfully. Through yearly banding and monitoring the Hummingbird Project can follow the breeding and migration trends and how the birds are being impacted.

It is thanks to Cam and Joy Finlay who had the inspiration, energy and foresight to get the BC Hummingbird Project established and nurture it into what it has become today. So much has been learned through the years of monitoring hummingbirds and no doubt much more valuable knowledge will be gained in years to come.