# SEEDS OF DIVERSITY

**Iowa DNR Prairie Resource Unit** **September 2008**

# Hum of the Hummingbird

**By Henry Narigon**

As August draws to a close, most people are hit with the realization that summer is also on its last leg. Nearly all flowers have bloomed and are now dropping seeds. Trees are starting to look tattered and that hint of crisp, fall air starts to blow in the night. These are your last days to see some of summer's favorite birds. One of my favorite and most memorable is that chittering blur, the hummingbird.

Iowa is the home of the Ruby-throated Hummingbird (*Archilochus colubris*). This small bird weighs around 4 grams when full grown. Male and female birds differ in plumage; males have a large red patch on their throat (or gorget), iridescent green back and white belly. Females are similar to males except they lack the red throat patch. Hummingbirds move fast, beating their wings 53 times a second, and have voracious metabolisms to match. They average three to four inches in length, with a three-to-four- inch wingspan. Despite being one of the smallest birds they have a very large range and migrate thousands of miles every spring and fall. The Ruby-throated hummingbird's range stretches from most of southern Canada, Minnesota, Iowa, central Kansas, Oklahoma and eastern Texas east to the Atlantic coast. These birds winter primarily in Central America, going as far south as Panama. Although the Ruby-throated Hummingbird is the only breeding species in Iowa, other types of hummingbirds may pass through during migration, such as the Rufous Hummingbird.

Ruby-throated Hummingbirds are mainly woodland birds; inhabiting eastern deciduous forest, pine forests, and woodland clearings or edges throughout their range. They also have been known to occupy tropical deciduous forests, gardens, orchards, yards, old fields, citrus groves, scrub communities and fencerows. Hummingbirds tend to seek out areas near water sources because of the large insect populations that often reside in them.

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Photo by Henry Narigon

**Hummingbird feeding on Cardinal Flower at Brushy Creek**

**Come and see the annual Hummingbird feeding frenzy at the Prairie Resource Center in mid-August**

Hummingbirds nest in woodlands usually building their cuplike nest on the branch of a tree around ten to twenty feet above the ground. Nests are made of thistle, dandelion, milkweed down, ferns, young leaves and mosses. The nest is cemented to the host branch with spider webs (or tent caterpillar thread) and pine resin and usually built under a canopy of protective leaves. Hummingbirds are territorial, but because of their small size and food sources have highly irregular spacing. Territory size can vary greatly from as large as a quarter acre to as small as 50 feet. Usually a hummingbird can defend a small patch of nectar-producing flowers from rival hummingbirds with little difficulty, but, when an invaluable, indefensible food source such as a backyard hummingbird feeder is discovered, hummingbirds must share between several hummingbird groups. This often leads to acrobatic dogfights and/or rival hummingbirds taking turns feeding throughout the day.

Hummingbirds feed on a variety of food sources including nectar from wildflowers, insects and tree sap. Hummingbirds are also known to eat spiders from their webs, caterpillars, aphids, insect eggs, and willow catkins. Hummingbirds play an important role in flower pollination; so much so, that some flowers are specifically designed for hummingbird beaks and heads. Many native plant retailers have pre-made wildflower mixes which will attract hummingbirds to your garden or yard. Some Iowa natives, which are hummingbird favorites, include Wild bergamot, Cardinal flower, Prairie phlox, Four o'clock, Columbine, Jewelweed, and Obedient plant.

By adding native Iowa plants to your yard or garden, you can drastically increase the numbers of hummingbirds, beneficial bees and butterflies. Because of residential gardens and feeders, Hummingbirds may now return to central Iowa where extensive agriculture has replaced most of the prairie where hummingbirds once abounded. Plan your garden for next spring, but include some Iowa native species so that the hummingbirds can feast on their favorite nectar and drink from your feeder.

# Species Spotlight: Rough blazing star

By Matt O'Hearn

## *Liatris aspera*

**Common Names:** Rough blazing Star, Button Snakeroot.

**Description:** Rough blazing star is a stiff, unbranched plant standing 2' to 4' high. The central stem is dark green to red and is covered with short stiff hairs. Leaves are lanceolate or linear in shape and are up to 12" long and 1" wide toward the base of the plant becoming progressively shorter and narrower as they progress up the stem. The central stem terminates in an erect spike-like inflorescence with pink or purplish pink composite flowers. This inflorescence is about ½–1½' long. Flower heads in the inflorescence are widely spaced with a leafy bract below each flower head. Flowers of Rough blazing star begin to bloom at the top of the flowering stalk, and gradually bloom downward, but there is no floral scent..

**Habitat:** Rough blazing star is common on upland black soil prairies to dry, rocky, and sandy prairies. It is often widely distributed but rarely forms colonies as does Prairie blazing star (*Liatris pycnostachya*).

**Flowering Dates:** Mid August to mid September.

**Seed Collection Dates:** Mid September to early November.

**Points of Interest:** The *Liatris* has a corm (a short, erect, bulb-like, enlarged base of stem, usually fleshy, underground) that can live for 30 years or so. Some tribes of American Indians used the corms as an emergency food source.

# Smooth Sumac Control

What can I do about all that Smooth sumac in my prairie? This native species can be a nuisance in a prairie. Burn it and one stem of sumac becomes multiple stems. Spray it and the other broad-leaved species are killed around it. While attending the North American Prairie Conference this year James Stubbendieck from the University of Nebraska Lincoln presented some great information on control of Smooth sumac. This article summarizes his presentation.

Let's start with the life history of this plant. Smooth sumac is a member of the Anacardiaceae family. It is a deciduous large shrub to small tree which can grow to 15 feet in height. Leaflets are sharply pointed with toothed edges. Smooth sumac flowers from June to July and fruits ripen to a bright red in August or September. The fruit serves as an emergency food source for Ring-necked pheasants, Bobwhite quail, Wild turkeys and many species of songbirds in the extremes of winter. Sumac is known for its brilliant red fall foliage and fruits. Smooth sumac is widely distributed throughout the United States and can be found in fence rows, open fields, and burned areas. Smooth sumac can also produce rhizomatous shoots; there-


fore you can often find it in colonial patches.

Here are a couple tips to help control Smooth sumac in your prairie. First, it is helpful to burn/mow the site prior to control; old woody canes make access to the plant difficult. There are a number of effective herbicides that control Sumac. The trick is to find an effective herbicide that does not impinge on the forb component in the prairie. A rope wick applicator is a great tool to accomplish this goal. After burning or mowing the prairie Sumac resprouts and grows quickly. In fact, by the middle of June or July it is taller than most prairie species. This is the opening where rope wick application of herbicides such as Triclopyr, Glyphosate, or Picloram work well. Fill the rope wick applicator and start applying the herbicide to the site keeping the rope wick boom above desired prairie plants, but contacting sumac stems and leaves. In situations where sumac is very dense you may need to apply the herbicide twice to effectively treat all stems. Dense patches may cause a build up of many stems on the applicator causing poor herbicide contact to stems and leaves. A second application may be necessary and will be enhanced if done at a right angle from the initial application.

Grazing is the natural sumac control in a natural setting. Eliminate bison, the prairies largest grazer, and this native species becomes a nuisance. A prairie fire followed by a rope wick application of herbicide is an effective tool to keep this plant from dominating your prairie or grassland. Smooth sumac has desirable features such as the seed being a food source form many bird species; therefore, elimination from the prairie is not desired, but **control** of this weedy native is sought.