

YZC Animal of the Month, December 2010

Plovercrest Hummingbird

Stephanoxis lalandi



It takes a keen eye to spot this one in the museum. This tiny skeleton can be found on the mezzanine floor, and belonged to the pretty little Plovercrest. In life, this animal would have had an iridescent blue chest, green feathers on its back, and a peculiar crest of long, narrow feathers sticking up from the crown of its head. In Brazil, where the museum's specimen is from, this species is known as the Tufted Flower Kisser.

The Plovercrest is a hummingbird. This family contains the smallest bird alive today: the bee hummingbird. Hummingbirds are named for

the humming sound their wings make as they beat rapidly, keeping the bird hovering in the air. In some species the wings beat up to 100 times per second! All that movement takes a huge amount of energy. This, along with the small size of these animals making them lose body heat quickly, means that hummingbirds have to eat lots of high energy food. Hummingbirds drink nectar – a liquid full of sugars found in certain flowers. Some species can eat as much as 12 times their body weight in nectar in a single day! Insects and spiders give the birds the protein and other nutrients missing from a diet of sugar water.

Look at the skeleton in the museum. Can you see a big (for a hummingbird!) plate of bone sticking out of the breastbone of this animal. This is called the keel of the sternum, and it is here that the muscles used to move the wings in flight attach. For its size this bird must have had some pretty big flight muscles!