



Those “Humdinger” Hummingbirds

A blaze of brilliant ruby red and a buzz of wings zing across your yard.

The brilliant ruby-red throat and distinct “hum” of the wings tell you that what you are seeing is a ruby-throated hummingbird.

Many people are interested in attracting this lovely and interesting bird.

So just what is a ruby-throated hummingbird?

A “humdinger” of an amazing bird, that’s what. You can hear this bird from several feet away because of the humming of its wings, which beat almost 80 times a second during regular flight and up to 200 times a second during a flight display dive. A ruby-throated hummingbird weighs 3 grams, less than most first-class letters. Yet this little 3-1/2-inch long dynamo can fly nonstop 500 miles across the Gulf of Mexico during migration.

Only the male ruby-throat has the throat patch or gorget that flashes ruby red. Depending on lighting conditions, the throat patch may appear black. The female does not have the throat patch. Both male and female birds have metallic green backs and white undersides. Females have white throats and young birds may have spots or streaking on their throats.

Ruby-throats are members of the hummingbird family. This large family of

birds has more than 300 species worldwide. This unique family includes one of the smallest birds in the world--the bee-sized 2-1/4 inch Cuban bee hummingbird. Hummers are noted for their dazzling iridescent colors and the ability to fly up, down, backward, and sideways. They move their wings from their shoulders, giving their wings free movement. Other birds move their wings from shoulder, elbow, and wrist. Hummers’ tongues are tubular at the tips and brush-tipped, for getting at nectar. Hummers can endure cold weather by becoming dormant, but many avoid cold weather by migrating long distances. Because of their small size, hummers have the highest metabolism of any warm-blooded vertebrate, except shrews. Hummers must therefore feed most of the day to remain alive.

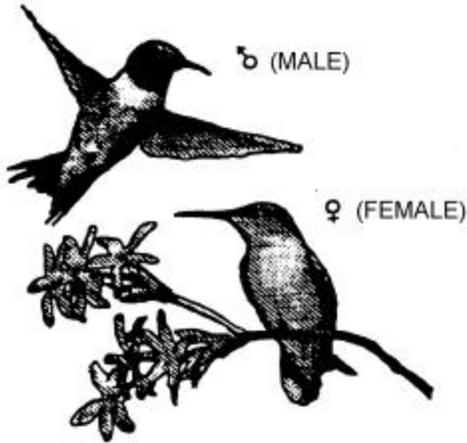
Some 16 species of hummingbirds nest in the United States, but only the ruby-throated hummingbird nests east of the Rockies. The rufous hummingbird, which lives in the western United States and Canada, is seen in the East, as occasionally are other western species. But for the most part, the ruby-throat is the hummer you will see in West Virginia.

More Interesting Facts about Ruby-Throats and Hummingbirds

--Ruby-throats are migratory birds. They live throughout the eastern United States from Florida to Maine and southern Canada in the summer. In winter they migrate to

southern Mexico and Central America. Adult males start their migration south earlier than females and immature birds.

--In West Virginia, adult ruby-throats usually arrive in April, but they can arrive anytime from late February to May. They leave by September, although late migrating birds can be seen into October.



RUBY-THROATED HUMMINGBIRDS

--Ruby-throats build their tiny walnut-sized nest on a small tree limb 10 to 20 feet above the ground. The nest is made of spider and insect silk, plant down, bud scales, and lichens. There are usually two eggs, which are pure white and only ½-inch long. The female does the incubation and feeds the young. Incubation lasts two weeks, and the mother bird feeds her young for a month. Ruby-throats may raise one or two broods a summer.

--Ruby-throats usually live three to five years, but they can live up to 12 years.

--Ruby-throats are territorial. They are feisty little birds and may chase each other around your feeders or around nectar-producing plants and nesting areas.

--Ruby-throats (and other hummingbirds) aren't considered songbirds. Although hummingbirds don't sing, they often emit twittering calls or give static-like chase notes.

--Hummingbirds have a long bill. When drinking nectar, they extend their tongue and lick up nectar at the rate of about 12 licks a second. The bird's tongue has grooves along the side to help it take up nectar. The tongue also has fringed edges that help the hummer catch insects.

--Hummingbirds eat nectar, but they also eat insects. The birds catch insects from the air, capture them from leaves, or grab them from spider webs. Hummers also consume tree sap from holes drilled by sapsuckers, a species of woodpecker.

--Hummingbirds may feed five to eight times an hour and may consume nectar for up to a minute. They consume half their weight in sugar each day.

Feeding Ruby-Throated Hummingbirds

Many people enjoy feeding hummingbirds. Feeding hummers, as they are often called, will bring them where you can see and enjoy them.

What to Feed Your Birds and Feeding Tips:

You can buy commercial nectar mixes wherever bird feeders and supplies are sold.

You can make your own nectar from sugar and water. Use four parts water to one part sugar, as this most closely matches the sugar content in nectar. However, a mixture of five parts water and one of sugar is also appropriate. Stronger solutions may not quench the bird's thirst. Boil the solution for two minutes to help dissolve the sugar and sterilize the solution. Allow the solution to cool, and then put it in your feeder. Store extra solution in the refrigerator, but be sure to use it within a few days.

You do not need to add color to the nectar.

Don't use artificial sweeteners because they have no food value. Don't use honey, either, because it ferments easily and can cause a fungus affecting the bird's tongue, which could result in the bird's death.

If you are feeding only a few hummers, you might want to make a pint of solution at a time. How much you make depends on how many feeders you have, how many birds feed at them, and how often the birds feed.

Plastic and glass hummingbird feeders come in all shapes and sizes. Choose a feeder that is easy for you to clean with a bottlebrush.

It is VERY IMPORTANT TO CLEAN your feeders thoroughly and replace unconsumed nectar. In hot weather especially, NEVER let the nectar spoil, as this could injure the bird. In very hot and humid weather, it may be necessary to clean your feeder and change nectar every two or three days. Nectar that becomes cloudy is spoiled.

Feeders:

Feeders do not need perches. The hummers will hover and take nectar the same way they take nectar from flowers. Perches on your feeders may encourage orioles to use the feeder. If you only want hummers at your feeders, you should remove the perches.

When to feed:

In the spring, put your feeder out when you see the first hummer. If you have fed the birds in the same location in previous years, the hummers seem to know that and may return year after year to your feeders. When looking for the feeders, they may blitz your porch, your yard, or you.

Sometimes hummers are attracted by red flowers which hummers know by experience often contain nectar. The early blooming shrub called Japonica with its red flowers

attracts hummers. You might try hanging baskets of flowers such as Impatiens or Bleeding Heart, which also attract the birds.

In the fall, leave your feeders up so long as the hummers use them. Don't worry about your feeder enticing birds to stay around too late in the fall. The birds know when it's time to migrate. You can get the occasional late bird into October.

Questions Often Asked About Feeding Hummers

"It's at my feeder; it's not a hummingbird; and I don't want it. What do I do?"



HUMMINGBIRD AT FEEDER

Remember that sweet sugar water in your feeder is quite attractive to wildlife other than hummingbirds. Hummingbird feeders are known to attract other birds including orioles, chickadees, nuthatches, titmice, tanagers, mockingbirds, grackles, and finches.

If other birds besides hummers use your feeder consider yourself lucky and put up more feeders. You're into birdwatching bigtime. Large-mouthed jars filled with

sugar solution may help lure larger birds away from your hummingbird feeder.

Other wildlife you don't want – ants; such stinging insects as bees, wasps, and yellow jackets; and inquisitive mammals like squirrels – also find your feeder attractive. Sometimes you can discourage ants by hanging your feeder on monofilament line. Other insects can be deterred if you smear salad oil on the feeding ports so insects can't get a foothold on them. And don't hang your feeders where larger mammals can damage them.

Honey bees may present more of a problem. Honey bees are also nectar-feeders and find sugar water very alluring. Honey bees are beneficial insects necessary for pollination, so you don't want to kill them. Bee guards are sold with most feeders and should keep bees from getting at the sugar water. It may be necessary to change the location of the feeder if bees get too close to your house.

“It has wings and it looks like a little hawk or hummingbird. What is it?”

It's a moth, called for obvious reasons a hummingbird moth, hawk moth, or sphinx moth. These moths superficially resemble hummers, but they're not. Hawk moths are tan with darker horizontal stripes across the back. These moths weigh 2.3 grams – more than some hummingbirds. Hawk moths, unlike many other moths, fly during the day. They are harmless.

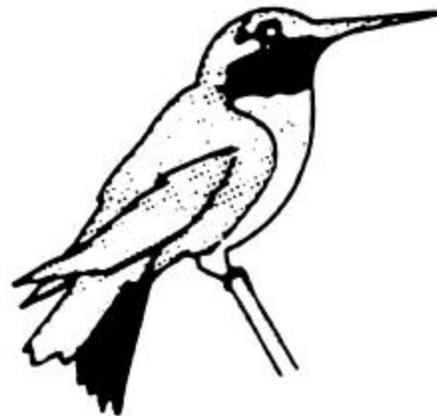
“I put out a hummingbird feeder, and all I get in my yard are house sparrows and starlings.”

Your lack of hummers is a complex problem that could be caused from anything from too many hungry bird-hunting neighborhood cats to poor habitat to habitat that is too good.

Poor habitat means that some areas simply don't have enough flowers, shrubs, and trees that hummers like for food and cover and therefore there aren't any hummingbirds. Good habitat means sometimes there are so many nectar-producing flowers in your area that the birds don't visit your feeders.

Other reasons you don't have hummers include: (1) It's the breeding season, and the birds are busy. (2) Your sugar solution has fermented or gone sour. (3) Hummingbirds, for their own reasons, just may not be interested in your feeder. (4) You are not watching for birds when they are at your feeder

Remember, hummers are normally present in areas where they find suitable cover including trees, shrubs, and flowers that produce nectar.



**RUBY-THROATED
HUMMINGBIRD - MALE**

Plantings In Your Yard That Attract Hummingbirds

Hummers are attracted to nectar-producing flowers. One of the best ways to attract hummers is to provide them with a hummingbird garden. Because hummers like many kinds of flowers, you don't have to plant only those having red tubular flowers.

Your goal with a hummingbird garden is to provide your birds with a variety of flowers

that will bloom from spring and through summer and into fall. You can grow your own, you can buy plants in a container from a nursery, or you can do both.

You need to select the mixture of plants that will provide blooms throughout the season. You also need to provide space around the blooms so the hummers can hover and feed comfortably. Because hummers are territorial, space out their favorite flowers so one bird can't claim them all. Hummers like perches, too, so provide shrubs.

Hummers are attracted to the following plants that grow in West Virginia. These plants are usually available at nurseries and greenhouses.

Herbaceous: Bleeding Heart, Butterfly-Weed, Canna, Dahlia, Delphinium, Fuchsia, Geranium, Impatiens, Lily, Nasturtium, Petunia, Phlox, and Zinnia.

Shrubs: Abelia, Azalea, Butterfly Bush (which also attracts butterflies), Flowering Quince, Hibiscus, Honeysuckle, and Weigela.

Vines: Honeysuckle, Morning Glory, and Trumpet Creeper.

Trees: Flowering Crab, Hawthorne, Horse Chestnut, Black and Honey Locust, Red Buckeye, Silk Tree, and Tulip Poplar.

This book will tell you more about hummingbirds:

The Hummingbird Book
Donald and Lillian Stokes
Little, Brown, and Co.
New York, 1989

link: web site photo gallery:

<http://hummingbirdwebstie.com/gallery/benson/gallery1.htm>