



Hummingbirds and Hummingbird Gardens

The Ruby-throated hummingbird is the only hummingbird that nests east of the Mississippi, and the only one that regularly migrates across the Gulf of Mexico. Its breeding range extends as far west as Alberta, east to Nova Scotia, and southward through the United States to the Gulf Coast and south-central Texas. Its winter range is in southern Mexico to Panama. Its migration route may carry it across the Gulf of Mexico or follow the land route through eastern Texas and eastern Mexico. A few eastern nesting Ruby-throats winter in southern Florida and along the Gulf Coast.

Hummingbirds begin their northern migration as early as February. The males usually arrive first, often before there are flowers for nectar. They survive in part by drinking sap flowing from woodpecker holes and eating from feeders supplied by us. Male hummingbirds stake out territories and wait for mates. They perform a courtship flight to impress the females. The flight consists of an U-shaped arc of 10-5 feet. At the bottom of the U the male makes a loud buzzing noise with his wings and tail. Then flies back and forth in front of the female with his beak open making a whistling noise. Males will drive intruding birds and animals from their territory by flying back and forth in front of the intruder. Animals are thought to perceive the noise as a swarm of wasps or bees and flee.

Hummingbirds prefer open wooded areas for nesting. They build a nest on a horizontal limb constructed of downy plant parts, bud scales, leaves and lichens on the outside surface. It is firmly anchored to the limb with spider webbing.

Hummingbirds prefer to nest in pines, oaks, hickories, hornbeams and tulip poplars. Two eggs are usually produced and incubate for about 16 days. Fledging usually occurs at about 20 or 21 days. One or two broods may be raised in a season.

Hummingbirds, because of their small size, are usually overlooked as prey. Their main enemy is the weather. Long dry spells, cold and extended periods of rain take their toll. Losses are usually made up for in a good breeding season. Hummingbirds have a unique ability to enter a sleep-like state that reduces body temperature and metabolism, during the night or during times of reduced temperature.

Hummingbirds do not produce songs appealing to humans like other birds. They have very complex songs that are uttered so rapidly that to our ears they are simply squeaks, chirps and twitters. In addition, they have the added ability to create sounds with their wings.

The normal flight speed of the hummingbird is between 25-30 mph, though speeds of 60 mph may be achieved during times of aerial display. Wings beat 80 times per second on average and nearly 200 beats per second during display. They are able to hover in place, and fly in any direction.

Hummingbirds do not suck up nectar. Their tongues are split at the end and fold into a tube. The nectar is swallowed when the tongue is returned to the mouth. Hummingbirds also find tiny insects in the throats of the blossom and have been known to hover around spider webs to eat spiders, only occasionally becoming entangled.

To attract hummingbirds to your home we suggest you add some of their favorite plants to your garden. Sugar-water solution may be supplied in a hummingbird feeder, but be sure you clean it and change the solution regularly to prevent disease. Cleaning should be done every 6-7 days in cool weather, at least every 3 days in hot weather. If the solution becomes cloudy and contains dark moldy specks it should be discarded and the feeder cleaned. Your hummingbird feeder should be cleaned with warm water. If black specks are present use a mixture of vinegar and grains of uncooked rice. Shake vigorously. If mold still remains repeat or try using a bottle brush. The mold

contains harmful bacteria and can cause a fungus disease on the hummingbird's tongue which will kill the bird. The standard mixture for hummingbird syrup is 1 part white sugar to 4 parts water, "stronger solutions can cause liver damage". The use of red food coloring is not recommended. Most feeders have some red ornamentation to catch their eye. Stir the sugar into the water and bring to a boil for 2 minutes. The boiling kills mold spores and bacteria, and through evaporation reduces chlorine and fluorine that may be present. Hummingbirds avoid chemicals and will not drink if the syrup sours. Never use artificial sweeteners or honey.

Your hummingbird garden should include water, open areas for their aerial displays, and roosting areas. About four-fifths of their day is spent resting.



Males prefer to perch in more open areas, while females and immature birds prefer the protective shelter of dense foliage. Their daily intake of water is as much as eight times their body weight. Much is from nectar and sap from trees, but like other birds they drink water

from whatever sources are available. Water in birdbaths is generally too deep for hummingbirds, but if it is shallow they will bathe in much the same way as other birds. After a wetting, they will seek a place to perch and shake off the water and preen their feathers. Keeping your garden well watered will also help make it attractive to hummingbirds, as they will drink from water droplets collected on leaves and blossoms.

Container planters and feeders can provide early spring nectar and refreshment late in the season as they begin their southward migration. They can supplement the food source until enough garden plants are in bloom to provide sufficient food. Feeders should be within 10 to 15 feet of adequate cover. Keep the feeder out of direct sunlight so the solution will not spoil. Window boxes and other containers can also attract the hummingbirds closer for better observation.

