

SECRETS & MYTHS REVEALED

attract hummingbirds!

Readers Share
their Stories



40

Flowers
They Can't
Resist

*see next
page for a*

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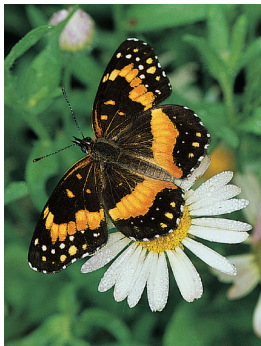
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meet the hummingbirds

Terry Wallace/Ecostock

Catching a glimpse of a hummingbird can be a spectacular experience. From their dazzling, iridescent colors to their needlelike bills, hummingbirds are among the most fascinating birds in the world.

No matter where you live in the U.S., at least one species of hummingbird likely calls your region home in summer. Read on as we introduce our top three favorite hummers, and then learn which flying jewels you can find in your backyard.

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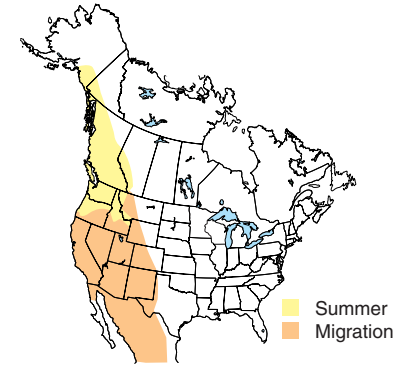
RUFIOUS HUMMINGBIRD

The male rufous hummingbird is the only North American hummingbird with reddish-brown feathers covering its entire back and much of its head and tail (thus the name “rufous,” which means reddish). It also sports green wings and an orange-red iridescent throat that sparkles like burnished gold.

The female rufous has little of the namesake coloring. Instead, it has green feathers on its back, head and tail with an orange-red spot on its throat.

In the summer, the rufous nests from Oregon and Idaho to southern Alaska and the Yukon. But you don't have to live in the Northwest to spot one of these brilliant birds. Rufous hummingbirds migrate

through most western states, following a coastal route northward in spring and flying over the Rocky Mountains in fall.



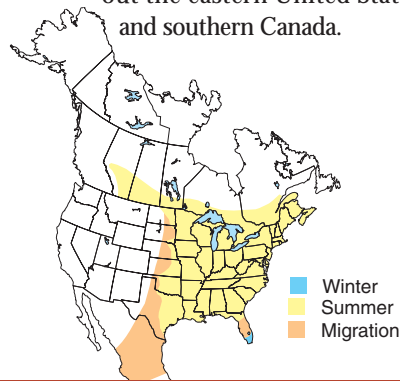
RUBY-THROATED HUMMINGBIRD

One look at a male ruby-throated hummingbird, and you'll know how it got its name. It sports a distinctive scarlet patch, called a gorget, on its throat. Females don't have the signature patch, but they do have the same metallic-green backs as the males.

This winged wonder is tiny, measuring just 3-3/4 inches from the tip of its bill to the end of its tail.

Despite their small size, ruby-throats are tireless fliers. Each year, these birds migrate up to 2,000 miles to and from south-

ern Mexico and Central America. They're also the most widespread and recognized variety in North America, found throughout the eastern United States and southern Canada.



Ramona Boone

Myth: Hummingbirds hitch rides on the backs of geese as they migrate south.

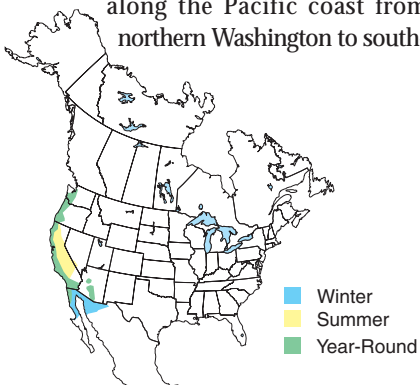
Fact: This legend is entertaining, but untrue. Hummingbirds and Canada geese migrate at different times and to different destinations.



SuperStock

ANNA'S HUMMINGBIRD

As the only hummingbird that regularly spends winters in the United States, the Anna's may begin nesting as early as December. It's a year-round resident throughout much of its range, which runs along the Pacific coast from northern Washington to south-



ern California and east into Arizona.

The male Anna's hummingbird is best recognized by the patches of iridescent, rose-red feathers on its crown and throat. Even the female sports a red throat patch.

When nesting time begins for these hummers, the males begin courting and defending their territory. They will rise high in the air, then dive to the ground in a matter of seconds before veering back up while emitting a loud squeak. If you happen to witness this sight, you'll know that nesting season isn't far behind.



Stia and Shirley Rucker

HUMMINGBIRDS IN YOUR REGION

These three aren't the only hummingbirds to watch for. Use the region guide below to know which hummingbirds to look for in your region. You might be surprised at what you see—like the

black-chinned hummingbird (above), which is considered the western counterpart of the ruby-throated. It covers a wide area, from southern Canada to eastern Texas.

Midwest and East	West Coast	Southwest	Western Mountain
Ruby-throated	Allen's Anna's	Allen's Anna's	Black-chinned Broad-tailed
Gulf Coast Buff-bellied Ruby-throated	Black-chinned Broad-tailed Costa's Rufous	Black-chinned Blue-throated Broad-billed Broad-tailed Costa's Lucifer Magnificent	Calliope Rufous

Myth: All hummingbirds migrate.

Fact: Most, but not all, hummingbirds migrate south for winter. The Anna's hummingbird stays along the West Coast year-round.

hummingbirds 101

Lure hummingbirds to your yard with these simple tips.



Maslowski Productions

FIRST THINGS FIRST

Mix a sweet treat.

Hummingbirds have a mighty big appetite. If humans ate like hummingbirds, they'd each have to consume more than 300 pounds of food a day! Satisfy a hummingbird's hunger with sugar water.

Here's the recipe:

Mix 4 parts water to 1 part sugar, boil and cool before filling hummingbird feeders. Change the solution every 3 days or so, keeping leftovers in the refrigerator for up to a week.



Birds & Blooms Tips

- To save on fridge space, try this sugar water shortcut recommended by *Birds & Blooms* reader Carole Miller of Meeker, Colorado. Make a concentrated one-to-one ratio of water to sugar. When you fill the feeders, mix a cup of the concentrate with 3 cups water.
- Freezing is a great way to store sugar water, says Walter Norvell of Fort Worth, Texas. Measure out the amount of liquid needed to fill your feeders and pour them into freezer bags. As you need refills, remove the mixture from the freezer, thaw and pour into your feeder.



RP Photos

Myth: Hummingbirds sip nectar through their bills like a straw.

Fact: Hummingbirds use their tongues to lap up nectar and sugar water at about 13 licks per second.



Susan Manchulenko

HUMMINGBIRDS LOVE RED!

Use this power color to your advantage.

Hummingbirds can zip along at speeds approaching 60 mph, and nothing grabs their attention like the color red. Put a bright-red bow on top of your sugar water feeder, or hang a feeder among a patch of red flowers to lure hummingbirds to your backyard.



Harry McClelland

Birds & Blooms Tips

- No detail is spared when Anne Speers of Conroe, Texas welcomes spring's first hummingbirds. She sets out a bright-red tablecloth in her yard to catch the attention of migrating hummingbirds, hungry after their long journey. You can find a red plastic tablecloth at party supply stores, but a red oilcloth or bedsheet works just as well.
- With dozens of backyard feeders to choose from, there are two main things to keep in mind. The feeder should have plenty of red on it, and be easy to clean and refill.

AGGRESSIVE 'BULLY BIRDS'

Don't let their size fool you!

It's common for a dominant male hummingbird to chase other hummingbirds away from a feeder to protect his feeding territory. In fact, these fearless fliers will attack creatures of any size and will even hover near humans in an attempt to scare them.

One way to solve the problem of bully hummingbirds is to hang another feeder around the other side of your house, out of sight of the first feeder. If the male can't see both feeders, he can only protect one.

Birds & Blooms Tip

■ Multiple feeders work well for Pamela Lockard of Bayfield, Colorado, but she also has another secret. Start the season with several feeders spaced around the yard. As more hummers return to the area, move them closer together. This gives juveniles and females a chance to feed while the aggressive males are busy chasing each other. Best of all, you get to watch the hummingbirds all in one spot.



Shirley Rucker

Myth: Adding red dye to sugar water will attract more hummingbirds.

Fact: It isn't necessary to dye sugar water. Feeders with red parts do the trick.

UP CLOSE AND PERSONAL

Hummingbirds are the only birds that can fly upside down and in reverse. You don't want to miss that!

With a little planning, you can have hummers as close as your favorite window. But it takes time to get them used to feeders that close to your house.

Start by placing a sugar-water feeder among red blooms in the garden. As soon as they get comfortable eating there, move the feeder a few feet every day until it's close to your favorite viewing spot. But watch closely—hummers have been clocked as fast as 55 to 60 mph!

Birds & Blooms Tips

- Since hummingbirds need to eat almost constantly to replenish energy, Kimberly Bestys of Hamondsport, New York is sure to offer an array of food to her feathered friends. Besides keeping sugar water feeders full, Kimberly puts out apples, oranges, grapefruit and kiwifruit. Not only are the hummers happy, but a variety of other birds are also attracted to the fruit buffet.
- Hang feeders in shady areas. This keeps the nectar solution from fermenting and algae from messing up your feeders.



Francis & Janice Bergquist, Mountain View Photography



Carolyn Kitchner

STAY OUT!

Say good-bye to ants, bees and wasps—the most common feeder invaders.

The best way to keep sweet-toothed ants away is by hanging a small ant guard above your feeder. This cuplike device is filled with water, creating a moat ants won't cross. The most effective way to keep bees and wasps from feeders is to install bee guards. These plastic mesh covers allow only hummingbirds to reach the nectar.

Nectar thieves aren't limited to just insects. Orioles are often attracted to the bright red of hummingbird feeders and will gladly feast upon the sugary treat inside. Even squirrels, woodpeckers and deer will snack on sugar water. Hang feeders high off the ground and away from branches to keep these intruders away.

Birds & Blooms Tip

- Hang a bee trap (a bottle filled with sugar water) near your feeder to eliminate many of the invading flying insects.
- Hummingbirds can even help manage other garden pests. Joanne Sumter of South Carolina suggests hanging sugar-water feeders above rosebushes—the birds will help keep pesky aphids away.



Kathy Dewine

Myth: Hummingbirds' only natural predators are other, larger birds.

Fact: Besides other birds like hawks, hummers have to watch out for cats, spiders, snakes and even frogs.

DO-IT-YOURSELF FEEDERS

Believe it or not, a few recycled items are all that's needed to make your own hummingbird feeder. And since hummingbirds often return to the same locations year after year, you'll want a feeder that works.



Birds & Blooms Tips

- To clean those hard-to-reach spots, try what Margarita Delbrook Villa of Santa Barbara, California does. Pour 1 tablespoon of uncooked rice into the feeder, fill halfway with water and shake. Discard the rice when you're finished. Unpopped popcorn kernels and sand works, too.
- Denture-cleaning tablets work wonders for hummingbird feeders, says Rachel LeBlanc of Shrewsbury, Massachusetts. Fill the feeder with water, drop in a tablet and let it soak. Rinse the feeder well when finished and refill with fresh sugar water.

TAKE IT TO THE CLEANERS

Eliminate the dirty work by keeping feeders clean. When sugar water ferments, algae grow and clog feeder ports and reservoirs. In hot weather, feeders should be cleaned at least once a week. The easiest way is to wash with a solution of hot water and vinegar, using a pipe cleaner to wash the ports.

Birds & Blooms Tip

- A jar makes a quick feeder that is easy to clean, says Linda Bussell of Imperial, Nebraska. Drill holes in the top of the lid, fill with sugar water and hang from a string in the top. Keep the jars filled so the hummers can reach the solution easily.

Birds & Blooms Tip

- An empty 2-liter plastic bottle is what Cindy Sexton of Monroe City, Missouri uses. Cut four V-shaped notches in the rim of a bottle. Drill four small holes through the bottle's cap and line up with the notches. Attach the cap to the center of a larger lid using hot glue or silicone. Fill the bottle with sugar water, screwing the cap on so the liquid slowly dribbles out into the larger lid when held upside down. Hang with a wire and wait for your feathered friends to feast.

Myth: Leaving hummingbird feeders up late into fall delays migration south.

Fact: You won't interfere with hummingbirds' migration; they know to fly south as the days get shorter.



Richard Day/Daybreak Imagery



Illustration: Larry Mikec

Imagine several gorgeous hummingbirds hovering around your garden, each vying for a dining spot. Once they've found your flowers, it's likely they'll come back all season long. Planting a hummingbird garden is no different than creating a perennial border, mixed container or any other garden.

There are dozens of annuals, perennials, trees and shrubs from which hummingbirds feed. Which ones should you choose? It's easier than you think! Here are our top 40 picks, along with a garden plan spotlighting 10 favorites, to get you started...

Myth: Hummingbirds eat only nectar and sugar water.

Fact: Insects and small spiders are also an important part of a hummingbird's diet.



RP Photo

RED FLOWERS

People often associate hummingbirds with the color red, and for good reason. These inquisitive birds can see red from a great distance, so offering a patch of red flowers to hummingbirds is like a neon “EAT” sign on a lonely highway.

1 Bee Balm

(*Monarda didyma*)

Perennial; Zones 4 to 10.

Color: Red.

Blooms: Summer.

Size: 3 to 5 feet tall; spreads 18 to 36 inches.

Care: Moist moderately fertile soil; light shade to full sun. Deadhead flowers to keep them blooming and to limit reseeding.

2 Cardinal Flower

(*Lobelia cardinalis*)

Perennial; Zones 2 to 8..

Color: Red.

Blooms: Summer.

Size: 3 to 4 feet tall; 2 feet wide.

Care: Fertile and moist soil, partial shade to full sun. Works beautifully with other native plantings.



John Gerlach



Marton Dye

TUBE-SHAPED BLOOMS

These flowers provide large amounts of nectar deep at the base of their blooms. Hummingbirds can easily reach this food with their long, tubular tongues, while bees and most other nectar-loving insects are left out.

3 Butterfly Bush

(*Buddleja species*)

Shrub; Zones 4 to 9.

Color: Purple, pink and white.

Blooms: Summer to fall.

Size: 6 to 15 feet tall; 4 to 10 feet wide.

Care: Grow in sun to light shade.

Considered invasive in some regions.

4 Trumpet Vine

(*Campsis radicans*)

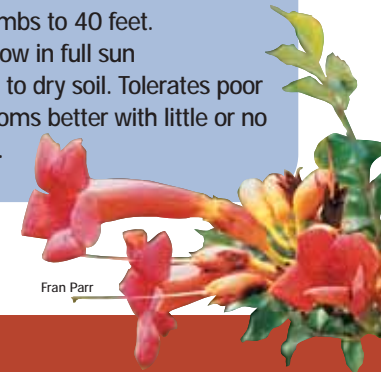
Perennial; Zones 4 to 9.

Color: Orange-red.

Blooms: Summer.

Size: Climbs to 40 feet.

Care: Grow in full sun in moist to dry soil. Tolerates poor soil. Blooms better with little or no fertilizer.



Fran Parr

Myth: Hummingbirds feed only from red flowers.

Fact: While red blooms draw them in, these sweet-toothed fliers will gladly feed from any color flower that produces nectar.



Sherryl Raymond



Ruth Reese

MIX IN ANNUALS

Annuals ensure long-blooming flowers that immediately produce nectar. From the time the migratory hummingbirds return north from their tropical winter grounds until they leave in the fall, the birds are sure to stay well fed.

5 Snapdragon (*Antirrhinum*)

Annual.

Color: Varies with variety.

Blooms: Until frost.

Size: 6 inches to 4 feet tall;
6 inches to 2 feet wide.

Care: Grows in full sun to part shade in moist soil. Regular dead-heading needed.



RDA, Inc.

6 Salvia

(*Salvia splendens*)

Annual.

Color: Red, purple.

Blooms: Until frost.

Size: 1 to 3 inches tall; 9 to 14
inches wide.

Care: Keep soil at roots cool and moist; grow in full sun or part shade in southern regions. Deadhead flowers to keep blooming.

CASCADING BLOOMS

Hummingbirds have the ability to fly forward, backward and even upside down! Some nectar flowers have adapted specifically to accommodate the agile fliers. The blooms hang downward, so only hummingbirds can reach the sweet treat.



Jerry Rabideau

7 Fuchsia

(*Fuchsia* species)

Perennial; Zones 10 and 11;
annual to north.

Color: Red, pinks, purple, white.

Blooms: Until frost.

Size: Trailing to 3 feet or available
in shrub form.

Care: Requires moist soil: check
pots twice a day in hot weather.
Pinch back flowers.

8 Columbine

(*Aquilegia*
species)

Perennial; Zones 3 to 9.

Color: Red, pink, blue, purple.

Blooms: Spring to early summer.

Size: 1 to 3 feet tall; 6 to 24 inches
wide.

Care: Low-maintenance plants that
prefer moist, but not wet, soil.
Reseeds itself.

Myth: Hummingbirds only like fragrant flowers.

Fact: Many flowers to which hummingbirds flock have little or no scent. Hummingbirds, like most birds, have a poor sense of smell. They rely on sight to find food.



Evelyn Lavallee

PLANT IN CLUSTERS

To get the attention of hummingbirds, cluster blooms together so they shout, "Dinnertime!" Combining plants with staggered heights will bring depth to your garden, as well as providing hummers with a nectar buffet.



Kelly L. Russell

9 Phlox

(*Phlox* species)

Perennial; Zones 3 to 8.

Color: Pink, red, blue and purple.

Blooms: Spring to fall.

Size: Up to 3 feet tall; 12 to 24 inches wide.

Care: Needs well-draining soil in full sun. Deadhead to extend their bloom time.

10 Butterfly Weed

(*Asclepias tuberosa*)

Perennial; Zones 4 to 9.

Color: Orange.

Blooms: Summer to fall.

Size: 1-1/2 to 3 feet tall; spreads 12 inches wide.

Care: Moist well-drained to dry soil; full sun. These plants will wander to where they're best suited in your garden.



Sid and Shirley Rucker

30 MORE SURE-FIRE HUMMINGBIRD FLOWERS

Shrubs, Trees and Vines

Dropmore Scarlet honeysuckle
Lilac
Mimosa
Morning glory
Rhododendron
Scarlet runner bean
Weigela

Annuals

Cleome
Flowering tobacco
Geranium
Hollyhock*
Impatiens
Lantana*
Nasturtium
Petunia
Zinnia

Perennials

Asiatic lily
Bleeding heart
Canna*
Coral bells
Dahlia*
Daylily
Delphinium
Foxglove*

Gayfeather
Gladiola*
Hosta
Penstemon
Primrose
Yucca

*In some climates

Myth: Hummingbirds have as many taste buds as humans.

Fact: Hummingbirds have between 40-60 taste buds, while humans possess about 10,000.

hummer happenings



Readers share their most incredible hummingbird encounters.

ATTACHED AT THE BILL

I spotted this female ruby-throated hummingbird (above) as it was enjoying nectar from a bee balm plant in my mother's garden in Andersen County, Tennessee. When it pulled its bill out of the bloom, the flower came with it!

I grabbed my camera and snapped a photo as fast as I could. The bird quickly shook the blossom off.

—Joe Kegley, Charlotte, North Carolina

HUM-DREDS OF THIRSTY BIRDS

A severe drought in Colorado brought swarms of hummingbirds to our feeders last summer. Some evenings at dusk there could have been 100 birds competing for the sugar water at our six large feeders.

One of our granddaughters (below) spent hours getting to know the birds and studying the different species. Sometimes four different breeds stopped by to feed at the same time.

The girls delighted in the wonder of these tiny creatures. They even trained the birds to perch on their fingers as they fed. There were plenty of giggles each time the hummingbirds' tiny feet tickled them as they landed. It was amazing!

—Sally Brandenburg, Arvada, Colorado

HOOK, LINE AND HUMMER

My husband and I enjoy fishing on a lake near our home, and some curious hummingbirds often join us!

The canopy and rim on our boat is maroon, and we have a red tackle box and red life jackets. When we're trolling near the shore, the hummers are often attracted by the red color and come check out the canopy. Then they get brave and fly around the tackle box and jackets. A hummer once perched on the back of the seat right beside my husband.

We enjoy our fishing trips, even when we don't catch any fish. Close encounters with these amazing birds are just as fun!

—Karen Lee, La Pine, Oregon



Myth: Hummingbirds don't have a traditional call or song like other birds.

Fact: Hummingbirds are known for the buzz of their wings, but also twitter or chatter while resting or chasing other hummers.



WHITE LIKE AN ANGEL

The antics of a little albino hummingbird charmed and entertained us one weekend at our cabin in Rock Creek, Montana. This is our favorite picture (left) of our special visitor because it appears that the rare hummingbird was actually grinning over our hospitality.

It made frequent stops at our sugar-water feeders. Because of its unusual coloring, the other hummingbirds seemed to single it out and chase it away. But that didn't stop this persistent bird from getting its share of dinner.

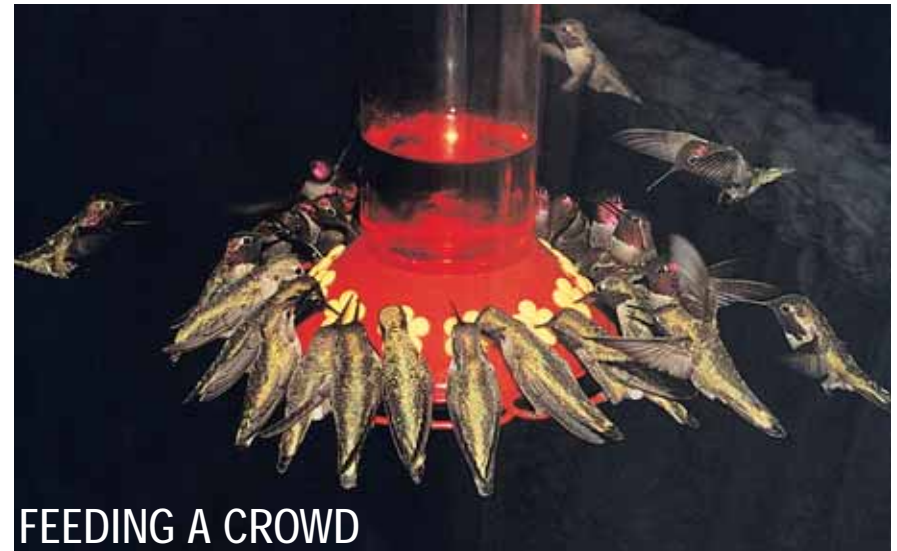
—Charla Bohlman, Missoula, Montana

SUGAR 'SOUP'

In a pinch, even the most mundane item can serve as a bird feeder. We had just arrived at our cabin in Vermont when we noticed a hummingbird fluttering at my son's elbow. It seemed hungry, so I knew I had better come up with something.

I remembered seeing a red plastic soup ladle on the kitchen counter—it was perfectly suited for the task. After filling the ladle with sugar water and fastening it to the porch rail, a hummer swooped in right away to feed!

—Phyllis Meyer
Franklin Springs, New York



FEEDING A CROWD

Our friends Milton and Ruth Klotzbach of Goleta, California took this picture of hummingbirds at their feeder (above). I'd never seen so many feeding together before. The photograph was taken at dusk, when the hummers gather in swarms.

—Margaret Kinnaird, Santa Barbara, California

FILL 'ER UP!

When it comes to impatience, my hummingbirds take the cake.

It started out with the little birds anxiously knocking on my window early one rainy morning, informing me that their sugar-water feeder was empty.

So, being their "pet human," I dutifully began making their food. The hungry birds chattered up a storm as I prepared the mixture. In fact, I thought I could hear them saying, "Hurry up, lady!"

When I went outside, one of the hummers landed on the hood of my jacket. Several more then feverishly buzzed and zinged around my head. As I filled the feeder, the hummers sat on the perches. Some even landed on my hand!

The people driving by must have thought I was crazy standing out there in the rain. But I just waved and smiled as I enjoyed the awesome miracle of my restless wonders.

—Barbara Lister, Oak Harbor, Washington

Myth: Hummingbirds have no feet or legs.

Fact: While they possess both feet and legs, hummingbirds can't walk. They use their feet to perch on branches and feeders.

SHOT OF A LIFETIME

While standing near my dining room window, I noticed a ruby-throated hummingbird hovering around my mimosa tree. I ran for my camera, but the hummer was too far away.

Every day I waited patiently by the tree, camera in hand, hoping for the shot of a lifetime. My patience was eventually rewarded with, not one, but several photos (like the one below) of perched and flying hummers.

—Kenneth Scales
Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania



BEAT THE HEAT

On a day when the heat index was near 100°, I noticed a ruby-throated hummingbird cooling off in a sprinkler in the front yard.

My son and I watched and laughed as the hummer hovered above the sprinkler, waiting for its shower. Then it began to follow the path of the sprinkler back and forth to get a better drenching.

When it got tired, it would perch in a nearby tree before returning to the sprinkler for another dousing. That hummingbird sure had the right idea to beat the heat!

—Mick Kurowski
Spring Grove, Illinois

MIDNIGHT BANDITS

For weeks, my hummingbird feeder was empty when I awoke in the morning, regardless of how much sugar water was in the feeders when I went to bed.

Thinking something was fishy, I set up a stakeout in the middle of the night to catch the nectar-stealing culprits.

I was convinced it might be flying squirrels, a bear or deer sneaking the sweet treat. But I was shocked to find these two hummingbirds feeding at night...joined by a pair of sphinx moths (right), a species that looks surprisingly similar to hummingbirds.

Knowing most people wouldn't believe I witnessed this nocturnal feeding feast, I made sure I had picture proof of this most unusual nectar heist.

—Janet Pegg, Cotopaxi, Colorado



NURSED TO HEALTH

As a nurse, I'm accustomed to helping others. But I never dreamed one of my patients would be a tiny hummingbird!

One day at the end of my shift, I found a hummingbird outside under a shrub. It seemed to be in shock, breathing hard with its tongue hanging out. Fearing it was close to death, I brought the hummer into the hospital and placed it in a denture cup.

I filled a syringe with dextrose and placed a small drop on its tongue. To my surprise, the little bird perked up and immediately started drinking!

I took the bird home in the cup and placed it in a safe spot in my hummer garden. After several hours of recuperating, it finally flew away.

I like to think that it's enjoying my garden with the many other birds that regularly visit.

—Janet Hodziewich, Rochester, Massachusetts

Myth: Small birds, like hummingbirds, are carried long distances by powerful storms.

Fact: High winds don't blow hummingbirds around. These fliers will take shelter in bad weather.

glad you asked



Bird expert George Harrison answers questions and shares his hummer wisdom.

Top photo: Chris Robinson



WHAT'S ON THE MENU?

Q: I'm wondering how hummingbirds feed their young. My neighbor thinks they hold nectar or sugar water in their mouths and feed it to their babies, but I think their bills are too narrow to do this. Can you solve the mystery?

—Millie Howard
Little Rock, Arkansas

A: I'd be happy to settle this discussion. Hummingbirds usually feed tiny insects and spiders to their young. They insert them right into the mouths of their babies, like in this photo (above) taken by Chris Robinson of Culver City, California.

They'll also feed nectar and pollen to the young birds. They do this by holding it in their throats and then squirting it into the mouth of the nestlings. Sometimes this will cause the youngster's throat to swell temporarily, resembling a goiter.

Myth: Hummingbirds can't survive cold weather.

JUST RESTING

Q: Early last fall, we saw a hummingbird hanging upside down from one of our feeders. Other hummers came and went without disturbing the immobile bird. When I went outside to retrieve what I thought was a dead bird, it suddenly flew away. Is this normal behavior? —Donald Anderson
Abbeville, Louisiana

A: Hummingbirds can shut down their metabolism to conserve energy and may appear to be dead, like the bird in this photo (right) taken by Wally Williams of Pine Knoll Shores, North Carolina.

This condition, called torpidity, is employed most often at night. Yet reports of hummingbirds becoming torpid at sugar-water feeders during daylight are common.

If you see a hummingbird in such a state, there is no cause for concern.

HUMMER SONG

Q: A hummingbird that frequently visits my nectar feeder seems to perch and sing after feeding. Is it my imagination, or do hummingbirds really sing?

—Mrs. Edward Hopper, Kankakee, Illinois

A: Hummingbirds will often twitter or chatter while resting or when in pursuit of other hummingbirds. These high-pitched calls, which are slightly different for



Wally Williams

each species, may be considered their songs because the birds use them to establish territories and for courting.

DYE JOB

Q: I've heard you're not supposed to add red food coloring to the sugar-water mixture for hummingbirds. Is this true?

—Florence Neilson, Duchesne, Utah

A: One of the older red food colorings was found to be toxic to birds, but with the new formulations, I don't believe that's still true.

However, it isn't necessary to dye sugar water for hummingbirds under most circumstances. The feeders usually have red parts, which provide enough color to attract hummingbirds. Clear sugar water will work just fine.

Fact: To conserve energy during cold weather, hummingbirds go into a state of torpor, where they might appear to be dead. When the bird warms up, it will return to normal.

UNEXPECTED COLOR

Q: For 2 years, I've watched a yellow hummingbird that visit my feeders. Everyone I've asked about it is baffled by its color. It's not quite as yellow as an American goldfinch, and it seems smaller in size than the other hummers at my feeders. Can you help solve this mystery?

—Judy Davis

Myrtle Creek, Oregon

A: Though rare, some bird species will produce a yellow version of themselves. This condition is called xanthochroism, an abnormal yellowing of the plumage. It is thought to be caused by a loss of dark pigment (melanin) in the bird's feathers.

If the mystery visitor was much smaller than a hummingbird, it could be a sphinx moth, also called a hummingbird moth. This is a diurnal moth (meaning

it's out during daylight), and one variety is yellow in color and common in gardens in the summer.

HAVE A DRINK

Q: I've heard pigeons and doves are the only birds that drink by suction, but what about hummingbirds? I've never seen a hummingbird tip its head back to swallow.

—Calvin Wheeler, Auburn, Washington

A: You're right; hummingbirds can be included in this select group. They are one of the few species of birds that swallow liquid without throwing their head back to allow gravity to help them swallow.

This is true of hummingbirds because most of their food comes from flower blooms, like the cannas in the photo (below) taken by Jan Dries of Dover, Pennsylvania. The birds thrust their long bills into the flowers to draw out nectar.



Jan Dries



John Olsen

LONG-DISTANCE TRAVELERS

Q: I've read a lot of amazing facts about hummingbirds, including that they have to eat frequently to survive. If this is true, how do some ruby-throated hummingbirds (above) fly 600 miles nonstop over the Gulf of Mexico during migration?

—Laurie Embree
Dawson Creek, British Columbia

A: Good question. The simple answer is that hummingbirds store enough fat to allow them to cross the Gulf of Mexico. In fact, they begin this storage before they even leave their nesting grounds.

You may notice that in late summer, just before hummingbirds begin to migrate south, they eat more food more often. They stop to feed along the way, too, and store as much energy as possible.

That's why it's important to maintain sugar-water feeders at least through September, even after hummingbird activity subsides.

WELCOME BACK

Q: When should I hang my hummingbird feeders for the return of my feathered friends?

—Frank Haley, Haddonfield, New Jersey

A: Early May is a good time to hang up your hummingbird feeders. In the South, migratory hummingbirds begin tapping sugar-water feeders in backyards in early April.

The funny thing about it is that if you don't get them up early enough, the hummingbirds will often remind you by coming to the spot where the feeders were last summer and hover there looking for them.

Myth: Honey is a better substitute for nectar than sugar water.

Fact: Honey is made from the nectar of flowers chemically different than hummingbird flowers, and is further changed by the bees. Honey also contains spores that may be fatal to hummers.

NO-SHOW BIRDS

Q: I planted a hummingbird garden about 5 years ago but have yet to see a hummingbird. Why don't they visit my garden?

—A. Gossart
Lackawanna, New York

A: Try placing a hummingbird nectar feeder (below) close to or among the red flowers in your garden. This should create a target area for hummingbirds passing by.

Make your own nectar by following the sugar-water recipe on page 9. Feeders should be emptied and cleaned twice each week. You can store leftover nectar in your refrigerator for up to 1 week.



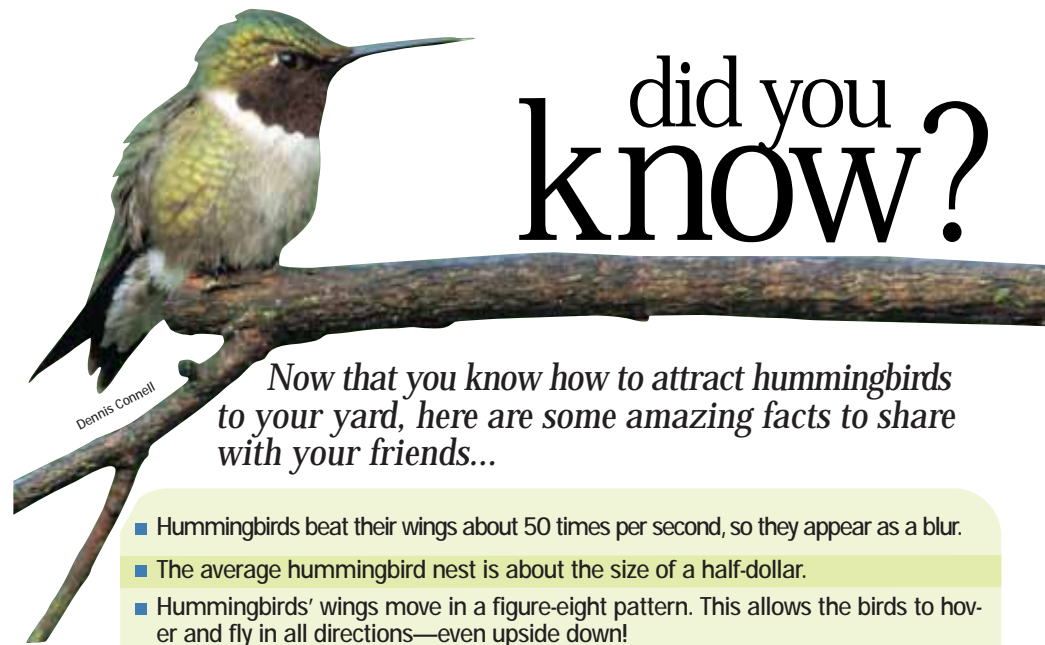
Bill Bridge

LATE-NIGHT SURPRISE

Q: My husband works third shift and I drive him to work around midnight. As I was coming home one night, I saw a beautiful green hummingbird hovering in the car lights above my morning glories. Why would it have been out so late?

—Sharon Johnson, Alvarado, Texas

A: My guess is that the car lights frightened the hummingbird that was roosting in the morning glories. In general, it is not common for these magnificent birds to fly in the middle of the night. However, they will fly in the dark during migration when they have to make the long trip across the Gulf of Mexico to the tropics.



Dennis Connell

did you know?

Now that you know how to attract hummingbirds to your yard, here are some amazing facts to share with your friends...

- Hummingbirds beat their wings about 50 times per second, so they appear as a blur.
- The average hummingbird nest is about the size of a half-dollar.
- Hummingbirds' wings move in a figure-eight pattern. This allows the birds to hover and fly in all directions—even upside down!
- Even at rest, a hummingbird's heart rate is eight times faster than a human's.
- Hummingbirds can't fly until their body temperature is 86°.
- Providing a light mist of water will help attract hummingbirds to your yard.
- Hummingbirds show they are "on guard" by ruffling their crown feathers.
- Hummingbirds do not migrate in flocks; they fly alone.
- Hummingbirds have about 1,500 feathers.
- Thanks to excellent memories, hummingbirds often return to the same flowers or feeders year after year.
- While resting, a hummingbird takes 250 breaths per minute.
- To survive, hummingbirds must drink almost twice their weight in nectar every day.
- Hummingbird eggs are about the size of a jelly bean.
- The Cuban bee hummingbird is the smallest warm-blooded animal in the world. The male weighs less than a dime.
- The oldest hummingbird on record was 14 years old.
- Hummingbirds have unusually large flight muscles, which make up about 25% of their total body weight.

Myth: Male hummingbirds do all the work when it comes to raising young.

Fact: Male hummingbirds don't help participate in the raising of their youngsters.