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You Too Can Attract Hummingbirds



Ruby-Throated Hummingbird

They are the smallest bird found only in the western hemisphere from Alaska to Chile, with the smallest of the 339 member family at 2.2 grams. The rapid beating of their wings makes the distinctive humming sound from which they get their name. There are 16 different species that breed in the United States. The most common member found in Missouri is the Ruby-throated hummingbird, *Archilochus colubris*.

The Ruby-throated Hummingbird weighs about 3 grams at 3 1/2 inches from the tip of their beaks to the tip of their tails, doubling their weight as they get ready for migration. Many Hummingbird species must travel from Mexico and Central America to get here. This includes the 2,000 mile migration of the Ruby-throated Hummingbird as they go from Panama to their destination in Canada with a non-stop flight of 500 miles across the Gulf of Mexico.

To provide energy for flying and to maintain their high rate of metabolism hummingbirds may consume anywhere from 2/3 to 3 times their body weight in food each day. Hummingbirds will feed 5 to eight times every hour for 30 to 60 seconds at a time. The large portion of a hummingbirds diet is sugar which they get from flower nectar and tree sap. Their long, tapered bills are specially adapted to feed on long tubular shaped blooms.

Hummingbirds are easily attracted to Hummingbird feeders. Hummingbird feeders should be hung in the shade and cleaned and refilled every three to five days. Fill the feeders with a solution of one part table sugar to four parts water brought to a boil and then cooled and stored in the refrigerator for future use. Weaker sugar solutions will be less attractive to hummingbirds, and stronger solutions may be harmful. Never make the solution from honey, because fermented honey can cause a fatal fungal disease in hummingbirds. It is an incorrect to think feeders keep hummingbirds from migrating by providing enough food to stay in northern areas. The primary clue hummingbirds use to migrate is change in day length. Hummingbird migration is caused by hormonal changes that take place within the hummingbird's body triggered by the changing length of daylight. Since it is the shorter hours of daylight in the fall that causes the hummingbirds to migrate, you don't have to worry that keeping your feeders out will cause the birds to hang around too long.

Hummingbirds lack a well-developed sense of smell and are drawn to flowers by their color instead of their scent. In general, the flowers most attractive to hummingbirds are red, orange, or pink and are tubular in shape, but the birds eat nectar from flowers of most colors. When planning your plantings, consider using native plant species rather than species introduced from other parts of the world. Over 160 native North American plants depend exclusively on

hummingbirds for pollination. Some of the favorites easily grown in this area are: bee balm, scarlet petunia, scarlet penstemon, scarlet morning glory, cypress vine, scarlet paintbrush, coral bells, scarlet salvia, spotted touch-me-not, trumpet vine (creeper), fly honeysuckle, trumpet honeysuckle and fire pink. Along with nectar from flowers, hummingbirds eat insects (off flowers and those caught in the air), spiders, and occasionally sap from trees. Your garden should provide a healthy, steady diet of both nectar and insects including a variety of plantings that flower from May to September.

Select your desired plants with light, moisture and available space requirements in mind. You may want to consider a variation on Grow Native using these selections: Columbine - *Aquilegia Canadensis*, Purple Beard Tongue - *Penstemon cobaea*, Foxglove Beard Tongue - *Penstemon digitalis*, Red Buckeye - *Aesculus pavia*, Rose Verbena - *Glandularia Canadensis*, Wild Bergamot - *Monarda fistulosa*, Cardinal Flower - *Lobelia cardinalis*, Copper Iris - *Iris fulva*, Rough Blazing Star - *Liatris aspera*, and Blue Sage - *Salvia azurea*.

Pesticides, especially sprays, can be lethal to hummingbirds. If they do not take in enough pesticide contaminated nectar to kill them directly, the number of small insects available in your garden will drop. This may cause starvation or death of their young.

Hummingbirds use water for bathing and particularly like to bath by flying through a fine mist. They will also bathe in water that is shallow and moving. This can be provided most easily by having a shallow birdbath that is allowed to gently overflow on one side (easy to do by simply assuring the birdbath is not perfectly level). Having a catch basin below it will facilitate recirculation of the water if desired or needed. Mist devices use so little water that normally no recirculation is required. A common technique is to mount a mister 10 feet above the ground and

allow it to spray out horizontally on branches below. Hummingbirds may drink up to eight times their body weight daily but usually get most of the water they require from the nectar they eat. They also drink water from leaf surfaces after rains.

As you may have witnessed, hummingbirds are very territorial and will perch in trees or bushes between feedings, attacking other birds that might try to feed at their food source. Unlike other birds, hummingbirds are able to rotate their wings in a circle. Because of this, they are the only bird that can fly both forward and backward. They can also fly up, down, sideways, hover in one spot, or fly upside down for short distances.

Helpful Publication: Nectar-rich Natives for Hummingbirds from Grow Native through The Missouri Department of Conservation; Pennsylvania Wildlife No. 6- Attracting Hummingbirds through Penn State College of Agricultural Science; Helpful Sources: The Hummingbird Society, www.hummingbirdsociety.org; <http://www.hummingbirds.net/>; www.hummingbirdworld.com/h/ and www.herbco.com/t-hummingbird-gardens.aspx.

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