

## Hummingbirds

Hummingbirds are the smallest members of our avian fauna and inspire interest and awe in people who observe these small birds buzzing through the air or hovering over a flower. Provide food, water, and a place to rest to attract them to your property.

### Hummingbird Natural History

There are 343 species of hummingbirds and they are all found only in the western hemisphere. Their fast wing beats, faster than any other bird, creates a hum, hence their name. Watching a hummingbird exercise its fine control of its wings, hovering, darting backwards and forwards, side to side, or even upside down, can be a delight. Hummingbirds can flash their colors by controlling the ruffling of their feathers or their angle in the sun. The male ruby-throated hummingbird's throat appears black until the sun hits its feathers right, flashing a brilliant red.

### Distribution

As many as 17 species of hummingbirds can be seen in the United States. In the northeast, the only hummingbird to be found is the ruby-throated hummingbird. Throughout the western states a number of species of hummingbirds are found with ranges that overlap. Most species migrate to the United States from wintering grounds in Mexico and Central America.

### Habitat

Hummingbirds are attracted to a diversity of habitat, from shrubs to trees. They do not normally nest in salt marshes or grasslands. Hummingbirds need small branches overlooking available flowers and a place to spot predators and to keep other hummingbirds from their territory.



*You can easily attract hummingbirds by offering nectar producing flowers and hummingbird feeders in your yard.*



*Photo courtesy of  
David Leatherman*

### Nesting

The small (1"-3" in diameter) cup-shaped nests are found in the fork of a twig or on the twig, and sometimes on wires, cliff faces, or other unusual locations. The nests are often well hidden on a branch overhanging a stream or water feature. Nests are made out of spider silk, tent caterpillar silk, and tiny leaves or lichens. Usually two eggs are laid. The female takes care of the young alone, often driving off the male.

## Water Needs

Hummingbirds normally get enough fluid from the nectar of flowers, but they do like water for bathing, cooling, and grooming. They need very shallow water, usually an ordinary birdbath is too deep. If you choose to provide water, flat stones could be layered in a deep birdbath to create a shallow source.

## Diet

The high metabolism of hummingbirds requires them to consume huge quantities of nectar with their specialized tongue. If you have enough flowers, you may attract a female to nest. A combination of hummingbird feeders and plantings will increase your chances of success. They also eat small insects and spiders to supplement their sweet diet with protein.

## Attracting Hummingbirds

### 1. Install Hummingbird Feeders

Many feeders are available in stores or through mail order catalogues. A good feeder should be able to be taken apart easily and cleaned thoroughly. Buy clear feeders so you can see if the solution is getting low or if the feeder needs cleaning.

Use a solution of four parts water to one part white, refined sugar as a nectar solution. Do not use artificial sweeteners, which have no nutritional value, or honey as it may spread a fungal disease to the birds. You do not need to add red dye to the mixture, as the red parts on the feeder will attract hummingbirds. It is important to clean the feeders every few days, whether or not the solution has been used up. Hummingbirds can be harmed if the sugar-water mixture begins to ferment. Clean the bottle with a stiff brush and hot water. Do not add fresh solution to an older mixture.

### 2. Plant Hummingbird Flowers

Hummingbirds have favorite and acceptable flowers. Choose a combination of wildflowers, perennials, and annuals for small gardens, containers, or hanging baskets. There should be overlapping bloom (from early spring to late fall) to provide a continuous supply of nectar, especially if a female nests and there are three mouths to feed.

Plant tubular-shaped, single flowers; double flowers often do not have adequate nectar. Leave enough room around the blooms for the hummingbirds to maneuver to reach the nectar. Vines such as trumpet vine and morning glory are attractive because of the vertical spacing of the flowers. While there is some preference for red or orange flowers, birds find nectar in flowers of all colors. Hummingbirds also eat insects and spiders, so avoid using pesticides in your garden.



*Hummingbirds prefer tubular-shaped, single flowers, such as trumpet vine (above), bee balm, and fuchsia.*



*You may already have hummingbird friendly flowers growing on your property, such as jewelweed, also known as touch-me-nots.*

## HUMMINGBIRDS ON THE WEB

All About Birds, administered by  
The Cornell Lab of Ornithology:  
[www.allaboutbirds.org/guide](http://www.allaboutbirds.org/guide)