

Hummingbird Information

We've been spotting them since mid-May, those little flying jewels called hummingbirds. In our region, the only resident hummingbird is the Ruby-throated hummingbird. These tiny, feisty flyers can be seen sipping nectar from brightly-colored (mostly red or orange), tubular-shaped flowers such as trumpet vine blooms, foxglove, cardinal flower, royal catchfly, red bee balm, and jewelweed. Iridescent green with a white breast, it is named for the male's scarlet throat (the female has a white throat – as do this year's little ones of both genders). Ruby-throats weigh only 0.1 to 0.2 ounces, less than a nickel. Kent McFarland of the Vermont Center for Ecostudies, who has banded these birds, commented, "when you have one in your hand, it is shocking how small they are."

Ruby-throats feed both on nectar and small insects caught on the wing or near flowers, such as fruit flies, mosquitoes, gnats, small bees and spiders. In spring, before most flowers are blooming, they visit holes drilled in trees by yellow-bellied sapsuckers to drink sap and consume insects attracted there.

Of course, many people assist them in their search for nectar by providing them sugar-water in commercially-available or handmade feeders. Below are some guidelines for good stewardship of these tiny creatures:

1. The proper formula for nectar is 3 to 4 parts water to one part white sugar (do not use brown sugar, honey, or molasses). Avoid using commercial preparations, as many of them contain red dye, which is harmful to hummers.
2. The best hummingbird feeders have bee guards to keep bees from entering the feeding ports and built-in ant moats, which you fill with water to keep ants from raiding the nectar.
3. Change the sugar-water solution every three to five days, especially in extreme heat and humidity.
4. Keep the feeders clean! It's pretty easy to clean hummer feeders, but caution should be taken to make sure that you clean them thoroughly to avoid endangering the health of your little visitors. This means taking the feeders down, emptying any leftover sugar water, and scrubbing them with hot water and dish soap. You can also use a bleach solution (made from 1 part bleach to 9 parts water) or a vinegar solution (1 part vinegar to 2 parts water). Make sure you rinse all parts thoroughly with clean water before refilling them.
5. You'll need to clean hummingbird feeders more frequently than other feeders. Aim to scrub them once a week in cooler weather and twice a week when temperatures soar. If you're crunched for time, Emma Grieg, project leader for the Cornell Lab of Ornithology's Project FeederWatch, has a tip. "Running them through a dishwasher will do the trick," she says. However, you should run the dishwasher without detergent—just hot water to prevent scouring and damage to the feeders.
6. Plant flowers to attract hummingbirds. A successful hummingbird garden should include their favorite flowers, have flowers in bloom all season long, contain trees and shrubs that provide cover and perching spots, and include a shallow water source with a dripper or mister. Favorite hummingbird flowers include scarlet sage and other salvias, red bee balm, cardinal flower,

spotted jewelweed, red zinnia, trumpet honeysuckle, columbine, Mexican cigar plant, honeysuckle fuschia, and trumpet creeper.



Ruby-throated Hummingbirds: male, left (courtesy of Georgia Audubon Society; female, right (courtesy of USDA)

Sources for this article include Birds & Blooms Magazine and Cornell Lab of Ornithology