

Attract hummingbirds to your yard

Of all nature's creatures, the hummingbird is certainly one of the most fascinating. The world's smallest bird, (usually about 3 ½ - 4 inches long and weighs .106 ounces) they can outmaneuver and out-fly other birds many times their size. Their jewel colored feathers and lightening speed when flying make them very unique creatures. For centuries people have been fascinated with these tiny birds and have made efforts to attract and study them.

Hummingbirds are native to the Americas. They can flap their tiny wings 15-80 times per second and have the unique ability to hover, fly backward, vertically and laterally. They get their name from the humming sound that is made by their wings when they fly.

They have long, thin bills which have an extendable tongue. This allows them to feed on nectar deep within flowers. In addition, their unique bill can be opened very wide; the bottom half can flex downward to create a wider opening and allow them to capture insects in their mouths rather than at the tip of their bills.

As with most species of birds, the males are more colorful than the females. However, iridescent plumage is present in both the male and females with green being the most common color. Their feathers are made up of specialized structures called barbs and barbules, generally located on the head and breast, which produce the intense metallic iridescence that make them so beautiful.

Many hummingbirds consume 1/2 - 2/3 of their weight in food every day and drink 8 times their body weight in water. They have a fast breathing rate and heartbeat and a very high body temperature. They need to eat about every 10 minutes while they are awake. They get the protein they need from insects and the sugar for energy from nectar. They need sugar for the energy required to keep their little wings going. In some cases the hummingbird will go into a state of torpor, which is when they slow down their metabolism at night. This suspended animation allows them to maintain body temperature and energy.

These amazing creatures are wonderful pollinators. The relationship between flowers and hummingbirds is symbiotic; the flowers get pollinated from the bird carrying pollen from one flower to another while the bird has a sweet meal of nectar from the flower. This allows the flower to reproduce and the bird to eat.

The hummingbird has amazing flying ability. They can fly circles around any other type of bird. As a result, they have little or no fear of predators and have been known to attack eagles when getting too close to their nests. In addition, they are quite the travelers. Many species migrate from Alaska to Central America every fall, approximately 2,500 miles. This treacherous trip over stormy oceans and steep mountains is made in reverse in the spring. Some species, such as the Rufous Hummingbird winter in the southeastern United States. Many of the little creatures will return, year after year, to the same gardens if food is available.

The males are not much help when it comes to raising their young. The mother bird has to work very hard to build the nest, sit on the eggs and take care of the chicks. Building the nest is labor intensive. About the size of half a walnut shell, nests are decorated to blend in with the

surroundings. Even though quite intricate and beautiful, the nests are very strong and can survive perilous weather. The mother bird utilizes the sticky silk from spider webs to hold the nest together. Generally two eggs are laid and when they hatch, the young are smaller than a bumblebee. However, they grow quite quickly and leave the nest within a few weeks of hatching.

Unfortunately, in some areas of the world, human population is expanding too fast for these tiny creatures. Many of the plants they depend on for their survival are being destroyed and some hummingbird species are considered endangered. But there is something you can do. Many species of hummingbirds have no problem using different types of trees for nesting or flowers for feeding. They really don't mind people too much and can survive quite happily in urban areas.

As long as there are plenty of trees for nesting and flowers for food, many hummingbirds will continue to thrive. You can even attract these magnificent creatures to your yard. After all, they don't make noise, harm crops or livestock or make messes in your yard. Simply by planting the right plants in your yard, you can have the joy of observing these amazing creatures and take pleasure in their antics and beauty. You can even hang up a hummingbird feeder!

Some hummingbird friendly plants:

Trees and Shrubs

- Azalea
- Butterfly Bush (Buddleia)
- Cape Honeysuckle
- Flame Acanthus
- Flowering Quince
- Lantana
- Manzanita
- Mimosa
- Red Buckeye
- Tree Tobacco
- Turk's Cap
- Weigela

Vines

- Coral Honeysuckle
- Cypress Vine
- Morning Glory
- Scarlet Runner Bean
- Trumpet Creeper

Flowers

- Bee Balm (*Monarda*)
- Canna
- Cardinal Flower
- Columbine
- Coral Bells
- Four O'Clocks
- Foxglove
- Hosta
- Hummingbird Mint (*Agastache*)

- Little Cigar
- Lupine
- Penstemon
- Yucca
- Beard Tongue (and other penstemons)
- Firespike
- Fuchsia
- Impatiens
- Jacobiana
- Jewelweed
- Petunia
- Various *Salvia* species
- Shrimp Plant