

Hummingbirds are welcome visitors to backyards  
By: Corine Burgess

For the past three years, my family and I have been fortunate to have a little visitor. Usually around May or June, we spot a hummingbird hovering around the flowers in our yard. The tiny creature usually hangs around for a few months and we get to enjoy the sightings when we're out in the yard.

Hummingbirds are one of my favorite creatures. They are fascinating little birds and they are incredibly beautiful. Their claim to fame is being 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.

You can attract these magnificent creatures to your yard as well. Just do a little research on what type of plants these birds enjoy and plant some in your yard. Hopefully next year you will be on the list of yards the creature visits while passing through. It might not hurt to hang up a hummingbird feeder with the sugary solution inside for an extra bonus!