



*Aerial*  
VISITORS

Story and photos by Donna Bush

Hummingbirds are a favorite backyard bird visitor for casual and expert birders alike. They can be very entertaining as they defend their territory and dive-bomb any rivals who dare to come near their food. That food can be a hummingbird feeder filled with sugar water or the nectar of thriving plants. I like to think of the feeder as a fast-food drive-thru and plants as a homemade sit-down dinner!

While our most common hummingbird is the ruby-throated, Louisiana has also become home to a few wintering hummingbirds. According to Baton Rouge Audubon Society's website, the following species have all been spotted within the state in the off-season: rufous, Anna's, Allen's, buff-bellied, calliope, black-chinned, broad-tailed and broad-billed. The most common of the uncommon are rufous. However, they look so similar to Allen's that until officially identified by a bander, they are listed as rufous/Allen. The next most common are the black-chinned, followed by the buff-bellied. Occasionally, broad-tailed are seen, as are the broad-billed and Anna's.

North America's smallest hummingbird, the calliope, has also been spotted.

Not only does the ruby-throated visit for food, they also breed and nest here. These dainty, petite creatures, weighing from .1 to .2 ounces, with a wingspan of 3.1 to 4.3 inches, can be found visiting flowers and feeders from February/March until September or October. To put it in perspective, they weigh less than a nickel! As miniscule as they are, it is not surprising that spotting a nest is almost impossible. I've heard of a few lucky individuals who had them nest in their yard.

They exhibit a bright emerald or golden-green on their backs and crown, with gray-white underparts. You can tell a male by the brilliant, iridescent red throat. However, if lighting is poor, the throat can appear dark, almost black. Females have a mostly white throat.

Agile flyers with a wing beat of 50-70 times per second, they can fly approximately 25 miles per hour! During intense exertion, their heart rate is around 1200 beats per minute, with a resting heart rate of 600 beats

## *Interesting Facts About* **HUMMINGBIRDS**

- Ruby-throats are found in the summer across much of the Eastern U.S. and east of the Rockies in Southern Canada. It is estimated their population totals 34 million birds!
- Banding research shows they are likely to return to the same area where they hatched.
- A nest is about the size of a half-dollar with eggs about the size of a mini white jellybean.
- Their weak feet are mainly used for perching.

**Other interesting facts about hummingbirds can be found in this article in GREEN boxes or circles...**

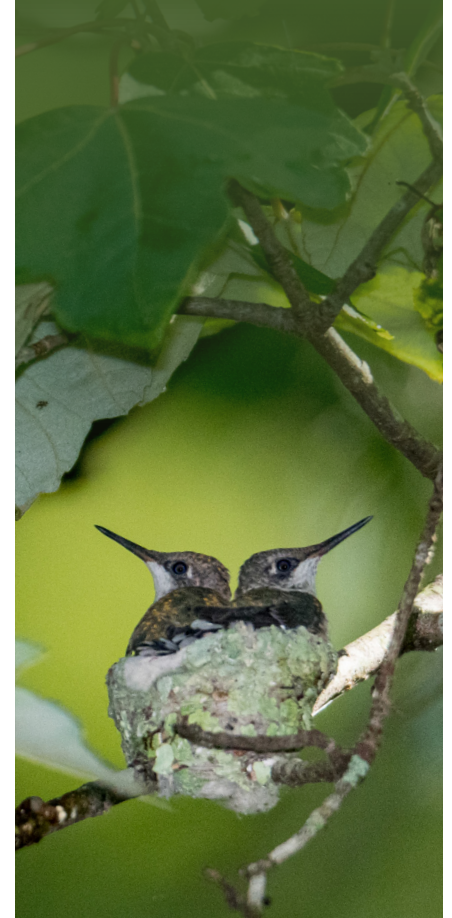
### **FACT:**

Hummingbirds have large brains compared to their body size.



### **MYTH:**

**Hummingbirds don't have feet and can't perch.**  
They have tiny feet and can't walk well, but they can perch.



**A ruby-throated hummingbird nest photographed by Donna Bush in Lockport, Louisiana.**

**FACT:**

Hummingbird flocks can be called a bouquet, a glittering, a hover, a shimmer, or a tune, but unlike most bird species, they don't migrate in flocks.

**MYTH:**

**Hummingbirds must migrate to survive.**  
That's not true of all hummingbirds in the United States.

## *Popular Myths About* **HUMMINGBIRDS**

- **They migrate on the backs of larger birds.**

While it sounds good, it is totally untrue.

- **Hummingbirds only feed on red flowers.**

While red flowers capture their attention, they will feed on yellow, light pink, pale blue and purple; as I noticed with my lantana and hydrangea.

- **Hummingbirds mate for life.**

They barely mate for a few seconds. Talk about a one-night stand!

**Other popular hummingbird myths can be found in this article in RED boxes or circles...**

per minute. At night, they enter a hibernation-like state, known as torpor, to conserve energy. During this period, their heart rate slows to around 50-250 beats per minute. A human's resting heart rate is typically 65-72!

Needing to consume about half their body weight in food daily, they can easily visit more than 1000 flowers between sunrise and sunset. Most people assume their diet is strictly nectar. However, they actually enjoy small spiders and insects, such as mosquitos, gnats, fruit flies and even small bees, which provide great sources of protein. They need this extra protein during nesting and prior to their long winter migration. Although a few ruby-throated hummingbirds can be found in the winter along the extreme Gulf Coast and southern tip of Florida, the majority migrate south to Central America. Some make this 500-mile trip non-stop in about 20 hours, flying straight over the Gulf of Mexico. Not all fly directly over the large body of water. Instead, they will go thousands of miles out of their way to fly over land, offering a refuge to

stop, rest and refuel. A ruby-throated in Minnesota will fly over 3000 miles to make it to Costa Rica! But an even longer trip is taken by the rufous which migrate from Alaska to Mexico or the southern U.S.

While I have not been lucky enough to find a hummingbird nest in my yard, I have been fortunate to photograph one in Louisiana! Last year, I learned of a ruby-throated hummingbird nest in Lockport. Thanks to some really kind people on the Facebook Page "Louisiana Birds", I was given excellent directions to the nest location. These instructions included precise information on how and where to find the nest, which involved locating a dead leaf to the right of the nest. I sure hope that leaf doesn't fall off! Given the fact that the nest was only about 1-1/2 - 2 inches wide and 1 inch deep, located approximately 25-30 feet above water and about the same distance from the closest place I could stand, it is not surprising that I had trouble finding it. Thankfully, a resident and regular visitor patiently showed me.

### FACT:

Today, hummingbirds are only found on the continents of North and South America, but evidence shows they existed in Europe 30 million years ago. There are 360 different species, with 15 species native to the U.S.



I only spent about two hours during each of my two visits to the nest, but it was an amazing sight to behold. The nest itself was about the size of a large thimble, smaller than the dead leaf. It was compactly built of lichen, moss and plant down, woven together with spiderwebs, displaying their extraordinary construction abilities. The lichen helped to camouflage the nest and gave it a bejeweled look. A nest takes approximately 6-10 days for the female to construct. She will lay 1-3 eggs, typically 2, that are about the size of a pea. Incubation is 12-14 days and fledging occurs after approximately 18-22 days. The female is the sole caregiver and feeder of the young. Mom was definitely run ragged trying to care for two hungry, demanding babies! She looked rough and in bad need of a spa day!

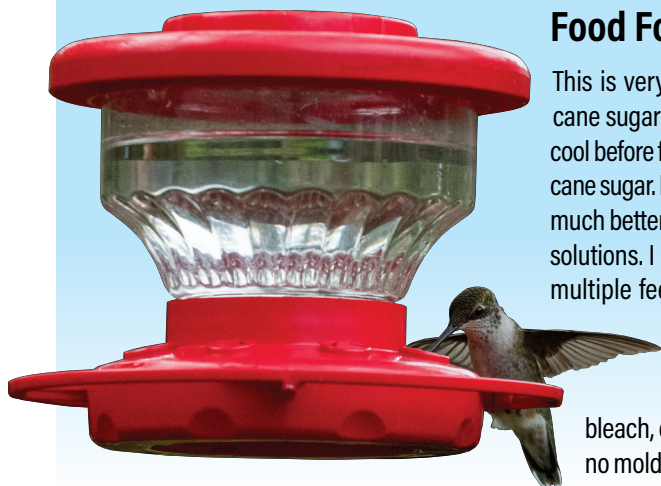
When I arrived for my first visit, I carefully re-read the directions to locate the nest and scanned everywhere with my binoculars. I knew it would be difficult to spot. The first local to visit didn't know about the nest. But I hit paydirt with the second visitor! I set up my tripod and focused my lens. Thank God for zoom lenses allowing me to zoom out and slowly zoom in to the nest location. There were 2 babies in the nest. My new best friend told me that Mom comes about every 20 minutes to feed. I had gleaned that they were starving first thing in the morning, so she would make frequent trips. I didn't have to wait long before she appeared and began feeding. After she zoomed off, I marked the time and waited for the next visit.

I made my next trip to the nest two days later. OMG! They had grown so much. Both were sitting on the edge of the nest, fluttering their wings. One was more of a daredevil than his/her sibling, hopping across the nest, wings flapping. I kept waiting, thinking that I would witness their fledging. But, alas, I ran out of time and left to drive home. About 3 hours later, I learned that the two young had fledged within approximately 2 hours of each other.

As long as we are talking about hummingbirds, I must mention the hummingbird clearwing moth that visited us. The first time I saw one, I did a double take, thinking that I had witnessed a baby hummingbird or some kind of miniature hummingbird. But, after a little research, I discovered that I observed a hummingbird moth

## Food For Hummingbird Feeders

This is very easy to make by mixing 1-part cane sugar to 4 parts boiling water. Allow to cool before filling the feeders. Only use natural cane sugar. Home-made syrup-water provides much better nutritional value than pre-mixed solutions. I usually make a large batch to fill multiple feeders with a small amount and store the remainder in the fridge. Clean your feeders regularly with 9 parts warm water to 1-part bleach, outdoors, once a week, to ensure no mold or salmonella grow in the feeder.



### MYTHS:

**Feeder nectar must include red dye to attract hummingbirds.**

This is not necessary as feeders have red parts on them to attract hummers and the red food dye could possibly harm our feathered friends.

**Nectar at feeders is better for them.**

Actually, natural flower nectar and insects are the best.



**FACT:**  
The tip of a hummingbird's tongue is split with inward curving out edges, that create two parallel tubes in their mouth. As the bird extends its tongue, the bill compresses the tubes at the tip, making them flat. Once the tongue hits the nectar, it curls, trapping the nectar in the tubes. The tongue retracts and the nectar doesn't spill. BTW, they flick their tongue in and out of a flower or feeder up to 18 times per second.

buzzing my hydrangea. Their flight pattern is similar to a hummingbird, allowing them to hover in front of a flower as they flick their long tongue to sip nectar. Unlike hummingbirds, they don't have a beak and, when not eating, their tongue stays rolled up underneath their chin. Usually reddish-brown in color with clear wings, they are only about 1½ inches long.

Like all butterflies and moths, they have a caterpillar; which are usually green with a horn at their rear end. Host plants are honeysuckle, viburnum, hawthorn, cherry and plum. With our warmer weather, they usually have more than one generation per summer. When the caterpillar is fully grown, it drops to the ground and spins a cocoon and pupates, taking advantage of leaf litter as camouflage.

I've also been lucky enough to photograph hummingbirds in Brazil, where there are 81 different species! Sadly, I wasn't able to capture all 81. However, I did observe plain-bellied emerald, gilded and swallow-tailed hummingbirds. They were just as challenging to photograph as our hummers! Like ours, they fed on flower nectar and small insects.



## How to Attract Hummingbirds to Your Yard

They are most attracted to red, orange and pink flowers. Feeders with red parts on them also get their attention. There's no reason to add red food coloring to the sugar water. Instead, try to choose native species that produce many flowers over a long period of time with little maintenance. I've had great luck

with red salvia, bottlebrush and lantana, but there are many more. Please don't use pesticides, as they would harm the hummers and other pollinators. Also, a birdbath with a small mister, bubbler or sprayer will attract hummingbirds, as they meticulously preen.

The swallow-tailed is one of the largest of its family, measuring up to 6 ½ inches long, with a tail half that length. They are found only in eastern South America; and, although mostly non-migratory, they will move north and south a short distance during dry winter months.

The gilded hummingbird is found in central and southeastern Brazil. But also lives in Bolivia, Paraguay, Uruguay, and northern Argentina. The plain-bellied emeralds are found mostly along the coast at sea-level of northeastern South America and they look similar to some of our North American hummingbirds.

I hope you've enjoyed this look into these tiny, aerobic flyers that we are fortunate to have visit us. Plant some attractive red and orange flowers. Keep your feeders filled with fresh sugar water and enjoy their aerial antics and beauty.

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### MORE FACTS:

- Unlike other birds, hummingbirds can rotate their wings 180 degrees, making it possible to fly forwards and backwards, as well as side to side. This is what allows them to hover in front of a flower or feeder.
- They have no sense of smell but have very sharp eyesight to seek out brightly colored flowers.
- When preparing for migration, they may consume up to 10 times their body weight.
- Their name comes from the humming noise made by their fast-beating wings.
- They have amazing spatial memory, allowing them to remember feeder locations years later. This also allows them to keep track of bloom peak and remember which flowers they have visited.



## Why should you keep your hummingbird feeders up in winter?

Many well-intentioned birders think keeping their feeders up will deter our tiny friends from migrating south and causing them harm during the winter. This is not true! There are always a few stragglers leaving late. They will desperately need an easy food source

on cold nights to help complete their long flight. An additional reason to keep up the feeder is the possibility of seeing a winter hummingbird in your yard! If you see a winter hummingbird, please contact me at [donna.bush@yahoo.com](mailto:donna.bush@yahoo.com).

### MYTH: There's a hummingbird family at my feeder.

It's not likely that they are even related. Males never spend time with his mate or offspring. Females briefly assist babies, but they're not likely to visit a feeder together.

