

Common hummingbird myths



Hummingbirds at a Spring Creek Feeder, photo from Ed Nickel

Hummingbirds are welcome visitors to our feeders each summer. They are found only in North and South America. One of the first requests by Asian and European visitors to the U.S. is often to see a hummingbird.

Hummingbirds are also very misunderstood birds. Here are a few of the myths concerning hummingbirds.

Myth #1: Hummingbirds eat only nectar, which is basically sugar and water. Actually, no animal can live only on sugar. Hummingbirds are so tiny they need a constant source of ready energy. Normally, they obtain this energy by drinking flower nectar, which is almost exclusively sugar and water. We help them by providing sugar water at our feeders.

But, like all animals, they also need nutrients, like fats and proteins. Hummingbirds are voracious hunters of small insects such as aphids, gnats and mosquitoes. Spiders are their favorite food source, especially

baby spiders. Spiders may make up between 60% and 80% of their daily solid food. Hummingbirds may also steal small insects from the spider's web, then eat the spider and use the web for nesting material.

Hummingbirds can sometimes be seen hovering and moving slowly along a tree branch, hunting for small insects and spiders.

Myth #2: Hummingbirds are attracted only to the color red. Flowers, feeders and nectar must be red. Actually, nectar is clear and sugar water should also be clear. Hummingbirds will feed on any flower regardless of color. A flower's tubular shape and nectar content are more important than color.

A bright red feeder probably catches a passing hummingbird's eye but feeders do not need to be red. Their location and sugar content are more important than color. The feeder outside my window is red with raised, yellow flower shapes around each feeding port. I imagine hummingbirds find the feeding port just fine without the flower designs.

Myth #3: Hummingbird beaks are straws they use to suck up nectar, or their tongues are tubes for the same function. Actually, hummingbirds do have unique tongues that are twice as long as their bills. The tongue ends are forked, or V-shaped. They very rapidly flick this tongue in and out of flowers to lap up the nectar.

Myth #4: once you begin feeding hummingbirds, you must not stop. If your feeders go dry, the hummingbirds that depended on that food will starve to death. Actually, they instinctively forage for food, visiting many locations during the day. They never become dependent on one source and studies have shown that birds with easy access to feeders use them for only 20% of their daily rations.

Myth #5: Hummingbirds have no feet. Actually, they have feet but all their feet can do is perch, hummingbirds do not walk. They will generally fly to even turn around on a perch.

Myth #6: Feeders must be taken down in early fall to encourage hummingbirds to begin their migration. A ready supply of sugar water will keep them here until it is too late. Actually, hummingbirds know when it is time to migrate south and nothing is going to keep them from doing it. Keeping feeders filled ensures summer residents have sugar water right up until they move south and offers sugar to migrating birds passing through.

Myth #7: This is a good one. The ruby-throated hummingbird, for example, migrates from eastern United States and Canada, across or around the Gulf of Mexico, to spend the winter in the tropics. The myth says these tiny birds cannot possibly migrate these long distances. They ride on the backs of larger, stronger birds. Canada geese are often cited as carrying hummingbirds on their backs.

Actually, hummingbirds are experts at long distance flight. They typically gain 25-40% of their body weight before they start migration. Some birds fly non-stop across the 500-mile width of the Gulf of Mexico. Over land, they fly by day and fly low so they can spot, and stop at, food supplies along the way. They use tail winds to help consume less energy and body fat. Research indicates a hummingbird can travel as much as 23 miles in one day.

Myth #8: These tiny birds are too small to be very bright. Actually, hummingbirds are highly developed, intelligent birds that take care of themselves just fine.

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