

Attracting Hummingbirds To Your Backyard

By *Melanie Votaw*

The hummingbird is one of nature's most amazing creations. It's the only bird that can hover in place and fly in all directions, including upside down. Its feathers are iridescent like a rainbow, and it pollinates plants as it travels from flower to flower. It fights other hummingbirds like an animal 10 times its size and can lower its metabolism to near death when it sleeps. No wonder the Indians of North and South America believed they were magical!

Bringing some of this magic to your backyard simply requires a bit of effort and knowledge. Every state in the U.S. hosts at least one species of hummingbird in the summer months, and in Florida, you have the pleasure of year-round visitors.

With urban sprawl causing the loss of natural habitat, backyard gardens and feeders help many birds to survive. Hummingbirds are especially desperate for food since their fast metabolism requires they eat every 10 minutes. In fact, putting these eating habits into human terms, you would have to consume 20,000 calories per day to keep pace with these avian gourmands!

Even if you have no backyard garden, you can attract hummingbirds with nectar feeders. Feeders come in many shapes and sizes, but don't be seduced by the fanciest ones. The best are the saucer-shaped feeders with a roof to collect rainwater and a moat or guard to prevent in-



sects from reaching the nectar. Never use tape or Vaseline on the feeders to discourage insects, as this can harm the birds.

Feeders with perches are also preferable, since hovering expends a lot of energy; and the ability to rest while feeding helps your hummers to conserve. Avoid yellow feeders, as that color attracts insects, while red seems to attract the birds. In fact, hanging red ribbons from your feeders sometimes helps the hummers to find you.

If possible, find out how the feeder comes apart and imagine yourself clean-

ing it. You will want to be able to reach every corner with a bottle brush. Never use soap, but if dirt or mold becomes stubborn, you can clean it with diluted vinegar.

Place your feeders out of the sun and in an area that is well shielded from wind.

Check for hornet and praying mantis nests, and hang your feeders well away from them. Make sure there are trees, shrubs or a clothesline nearby for the birds to perch in between feedings, and avoid areas that have been treated with pesticides or where cats roam wild.

Making the nectar for your feeders couldn't be simpler. Mix four parts spring or tap water to one part white cane sugar. Do not use distilled water, and never substitute other sweeteners. Hummingbirds are very particular, and certain types of sweeteners—even natural ones—can be harmful to them. Boil the water before adding the sugar, and then re-measure it to make sure your proportions are still correct. You will need to change the nectar every three days or as soon as it looks cloudy. Otherwise, it can ferment, and the birds will leave your yard for better grub elsewhere. Never add red food coloring to the mixture, and avoid buying commercially prepared nectar, as it can spoil faster.

Bats may raid your feeders during the night, making it necessary for you to fill the feeders early in the morning to accommodate the hummingbirds. The only way to avoid this is to bring the feeders

inside during the night, but bear in mind that bats can be helpful, as they also pollinate flowers and eat annoying insects in your yard.

Watching hummingbirds at your feeders can give you hours of pleasure. They're very entertaining as they dart and sip, perch and preen, chase and fight. It's perfectly acceptable to place a feeder next to a window where you can watch from indoors, but be sure to put decals on the windows to prevent the birds from flying into the glass.

Of course, if you can plant nectar-rich flowers such as Columbine, Coral Bells, Hibiscus, Honeysuckle, Lemon, Orange, Redbud, and Mimosa (to name just a few), you will no doubt find hummingbirds flocking to your yard. While hummingbirds will feed from flowers of any color, they do seem to be partial to the color red, and tubular shaped flowers are especially advantageous, since bats and insects don't have the long bills necessary to feed from them. Even if you have flowers, it's good to also hang feeders near the plants.

As a final touch for success, find an area where you can place ripe slices of fruit to attract the fruit flies that hummingbirds need for protein. If you provide flowers, feeders, and flies, hummingbirds will definitely visit you. You may need to give them some time to find you, however. Be patient, and you're certain to reap the rewards of your efforts.

Melanie Votaw is a freelance writer and nature photographer. The author of seven books, including Hummingbirds: Jewels On Air, she also teaches the online course "Attracting Backyard Hummingbirds" for Suite101.com. Visit www.votawphotography.com

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