

The Hum about Hummingbirds

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Hummingbirds are truly something to admire not only for their beauty but also for the services they provide to their environment especially when we think about the work they do as pollinators. How much do you know about hummingbirds? Where do they live? How did they get their name? Just how fast do their wings move? What all do they eat? These are just a few of the many questions that I will answer as we learn about one of nature's amazing creatures, the hummingbird. This article will focus on one hummingbird that calls Ohio home, the ruby-throated hummingbird.

According to the Ohio Department of Natural Resources (ODNR), the ruby-throated hummingbird is among one of the smallest of the bird species coming in at a weight of less than once ounce. This species has the ability to move in a forward and reverse direction along with hovering while in flight. ODNR writes that they have been known to fly speeds upward of 60 miles per hour and that the "hum" you hear come from the fast movement of their wings. Its tail that has a slight fork along with a red throat can identify the male ruby - throated hummingbird. ODNR writes that the shade of red that is viewed highly depends on how the sunlight falls on the bird's neck.

The male and female will have a shiny green back that can be further used in the identification process. ODNR says that observers can pick out a young bird with the light tan colors that appear on the outer reaches of the feathers on their head that tend to disappear once the birds age. With the hummingbird being some of the smallest birds one would easily conclude that the eggs from which they hatch would also be small. According to the Smithsonian's National Zoo & Conservation Biology Institute, the ruby-throated hummingbird lays one to two eggs in a "clutch" that are about the size of a pea that is placed in a shell the size of a walnut that is made from spider webs and other various plant material.

Hummingbirds will typically be found by themselves rather than in groups. When birds gather in large clusters at a feeder, it is not uncommon to find hummingbirds quarrelling with one another. Ruby-throated hummingbirds prefer a habitat that provides wooded area that is near a body of water. ODNR writes that hummingbirds like wetland flowers such as jewelweed and cardinal lobelia where they will feed both on the nectar produced by the plant along with small spiders they extract from the plant. They will also frequent your landscaping and bird feeders as many of us already know.

The hummingbird makes its walnut sized nest in trees close to the edge of the woods and close to a source of water. The male of this species is known to breed with many mates during their breeding season, which spans the months of June and July. Eggs hatch within these same two months with an incubation time of about 14 days.

The question on the mind of many naturalists and gardeners is what can be done to create a hummingbird friendly backyard. This bird like so many others is on the search for food that is commonly going to be nectar produced by plants. Nectar is a sugary liquid produced by plants as a treat to attract pollinators such as the hummingbird to help spread their pollen. What are some plants you can include in your backyard to be a friend to the hummingbird? According to the Smithsonian, the following species will attract hummingbirds: bee balm, cardinal flower, trumpet creeper, coral honeysuckle, and columbine.

The Audubon Society provides additional tips on attracting hummingbirds. The hummingbird is looking for plants that produce plenty of nectar and thus sugar for the rapid motion of their wings. The goal is to plant species that are similar to one another in groups while going with a selection that will offer blooms at various points throughout the season to provide for food to be available all season long. Also, be sure to leave small twigs and branches on bushes as these provide for a great perch for the hummingbird.

This is only a small sample of the “hum” about hummingbirds as there is so much more to know about them. Be sure to get outdoors and learning more about this bird and many others that are found throughout nature! Happy trails!