

Hummingbirds at Home

How to Create a Hummingbird-Friendly Yard

A little water, a few flowers, and a few perches will bring these tiny dynamos to visit *Selasphorus Hummingbird*, SP. at a Trumpet Honeysuckle. Photo: Roger Levien/Audubon Photography Awards



Hummingbirds are truly remarkable and fascinating creatures. A diverse family, hummingbirds include the world's smallest bird, the Bee Hummingbird of Cuba, and some of the strongest migrants. The Rufous Hummingbird, if based upon distance traveled in proportion to body size, undertakes the longest avian migration in the world. To sustain their supercharged metabolisms, hummingbirds must eat once every 10 to 15 minutes and visit between 1,000 and 2,000 flowers per day.

You can attract, feed and nourish hummingbirds in your backyard with a few easy steps. Flowers, feeders, perches, insects, and water are the key ingredients to a healthy yard that will attract these amazing jewels.

Flowers

Hummingbirds are specialized for nectar-eating, evident by long bills and grooved tongues ideal for probing flowers. Sugary nectar supplies fast energy and makes up 90 percent of a hummingbird's diet. Unfortunately, due to development and climate change, hummingbird-friendly habitat is rapidly disappearing across many hummingbird migration routes. You can create a healthy environment for hummingbirds with these steps:

- Fill your yard with flowering plants, vines, shrubs, and trees. Even a window box or hanging basket can help.
- Grow native plants like trumpet honeysuckle, bee balm, and hummingbird sage, which provide much more nectar than hybrids and exotics.
- Plant red or orange tubular flowers to attract hummingbirds, in addition to other flowers rich in nectar.
- Group similar plants together and choose species with different blooming periods so that there will be a steady supply of flowers nearly year round.
- Leave some sticks and small branches on bushes and trees to enable ready perches for hummingbirds.

•Encourage your neighbors to make their yards hummingbird friendly. An entire corridor of habitat is much more valuable than scattered patches.

Bill Hilton, Jr. of South Carolina, who has studied hummingbirds in the southeastern United States and in Latin America for several decades, suggests the following flowers below as a starting point for your yard. Many of these plants are found continent-wide.

For a more comprehensive list with regional information please [click here](#).

Recommended native nectar flowers

- 1.Trumpet creeper, *Campsis radicans*
- 2.Beebalm or Oswego tea, *Monarda didyma*
- 3.Trumpet honeysuckle, *Lonicera sempervirens*
- 4.Cardinal flower, *Lobelia cardinalis*
- 5.Spotted jewelweed, *Impatiens capensis*
- 6.Red columbine, *Aquilegia canadensis*
- 7.Canada lily, *Lilium canadense*
- 8.Indian pink, *Spigelia marilandica*
- 9.Red buckeye, *Aesculus pavia*
- 10.Mountain rosebay or Catawba rhododendron, *Rhododendron catawbiense*

Planting for nesting hummingbirds

Hummingbirds prefer to nest near a ready supply of nectar and other food, and you can encourage them to nest in your yard by maintaining some shrubbery and small deciduous trees in which they can seek protective cover, especially around the edges of your yard. They build their tiny, expandable nests on tree limbs and other small horizontal surfaces, often constructing them from lichens and spider webs.

Perches

Make sure you have plenty of safe places for hummingbirds to rest and sleep in your yard. Hummingbirds often perch to rest or survey their territory; some spots should be in the open and obvious for territorial birds, while others should be in protected areas, hidden from view and buffered from any cooler overnight temperatures.

Insects

Hummingbirds need protein from pollen and insects to maintain their bodies and grow new feathers. Like swifts, hummingbirds are specialized aerial hunters, and can snatch small insects from the air. Hummingbirds also glean insects from leaves and from spider webs. To maintain a healthy ecosystem in your yard:

- Eliminate pesticides. Spiders and insects (arthropods) are an important part of an adult bird's diet, and young hummingbirds still in the nest are almost exclusively fed arthropods.
- Make sure your yard contains insect-pollinated flowers as well as hummingbird-pollinated plants.
- Hang a basket with overripe fruit or banana peels close to a hummingbird feeder to attract tiny fruit flies.
- Research has shown that ecosystems with a high percentage of native plants will produce a higher volume of nectar than exotic plantings, and thus support a greater concentration of insects and spiders available as prey for hummingbirds and other birds.

Water

Hummingbirds like to bathe frequently -- even in the pools of droplets that collect on leaves. Provide your yard with a constant source of water from a drip fountain attachment or a fine misting device. A misting device is an especially attractive water source for hummingbirds.

Nectar feeders (hummingbird feeders)

Backyard hummingbird feeders provide hummingbirds with nectar critical to their survival, especially during fall and spring migration. Follow these steps to ensure your yard is a safe and nutritious stopover for hummingbirds:

- Hang several feeders far enough apart that the hummingbirds cannot see one another; this will prevent one bird from dominating the rest.
- Fill the feeders with sugar water; made by combining four parts hot water to one part white sugar, boiled for one to two minutes. Never use honey, artificial sweeteners, or red dye.
- Hang your feeders in the shade to prevent the sugar solution from fermenting.
- Be sure to change the sugar water regularly -- before it gets cloudy, or about twice a week in warm weather.
- Clean the feeders with a solution of one part white vinegar to four parts water about once a week. If your feeder has become dirty, try adding some grains of dry rice to the vinegar solution and shake vigorously. The grains act as a good abrasive.
- Rinse your feeder well with warm water three times before refilling with sugar solution.
- Check Hummingbirds at Home and eBird to find out when the first hummingbird sightings occur each spring, and hang your feeders up a couple of weeks before that. In the fall, keep your feeders up for two weeks after you see the last bird using it.

Feeding Hummingbirds

Q: Are there any downsides to supplying a hummingbird feeder to the birds in my yard?

A: No. Your hummingbird feeder will be a supplemental source of nectar for your local hummingbirds, and can help them through times when there aren't as many blooming flowers available nearby.

Q: Do I need to buy special food for my hummingbirds?

A: No. The best (and least expensive) solution for your feeder is a 1:4 solution of refined white sugar to tap water. That's ¼ cup of sugar in 1 cup of water. Bring the solution to a boil, then let it cool before filling the feeder. You can make a larger batch and refrigerate the extra solution, just remember to bring it up to room temperature before you re-fill the feeder.

Q: Should I put red coloring in the nectar solution?

A: No, red coloring is not necessary and the reddening chemicals could prove to be harmful to the birds. Natural nectar itself is a clear solution.

Q: Are hummingbirds attracted to red-colored things?

A: Yes, hummingbirds are attracted to red, as well as other brightly colored objects, because they have learned to associate high-quality nectar with red flowers.

Q: Should I use brown sugar, honey, or molasses instead of white sugar?

A: No, only use refined white sugar. Other sweetening agents have additional ingredients that can prove detrimental to the hummingbirds. Never use artificial sweeteners to make hummingbird nectar.

Q: How often should I empty and clean the feeder?

A: In hot weather, the feeder should be emptied and cleaned twice per week. In cooler weather, once per week is enough. If your hummingbirds empty the feeder with greater frequency, clean it every time it's empty. Cleaning with hot tap water works fine, or use a weak vinegar solution. Avoid using dish soaps, as this can leave harmful residue in the feeder.

Q: When should I put out my hummingbird feeder?

A: In most areas of North America where hummingbirds leave during the winter, it's best to put the feeder out about a week before they normally arrive in your yard. This date varies regionally. If you don't know when your birds usually arrive check with your local Audubon center, chapter, or local bird club.

Q: When should I take down my feeders in the fall?

A: You can leave your feeders out for as long as you have hummingbirds around. You can even continue to provide the feeder after your hummingbirds disappear—late migrants or out-of-range species can show up into early winter. Follow the guidelines for keeping the feeders clean, even if the nectar goes untouched. Always discard any unused nectar in the feeder when you take it down for cleaning.

Q: Won't it make my hummingbirds stay too late if I continue to leave the feeder out for them?

A: No, hummingbirds are migratory species and are genetically programmed to head south in the fall. It's not a lack of nectar source or colder weather that makes them leave—they know it's time based on changes in the length of the day and the angle of the sun.

Q: I live in an area where we have hummingbirds year round. Is it okay for me to feed them year round as well?

A: Absolutely! Just follow the guidelines for keeping your feeders clean.

Feeding lingering or wintering hummingbirds:

Q: I have a hummingbird in my area past migration time and I'd like to feed it as long as it stays around, what do I need to know?

If you live in an area where the night-time temperatures dip below freezing regularly you will need to make sure your nectar feeder does not freeze. In areas where the nighttime temperatures only dip slightly below freezing your hummingbird nectar may not freeze as the sugar solution has a lower freezing point than plain water. However, it's better not to have your hummingbirds drink very cold nectar; this can actually cold-stun them. For cold weather feeding, either bring the feeder indoors overnight when it gets cold and put it back outside first thing in the morning (hummingbirds need to feed as early as possible, especially when it's cold, to keep their energy up) or you can hang an incandescent light bulb near the feeder. These bulbs give off enough heat to keep the feeder warm.

Please note that it is illegal to capture hummingbirds or bring them inside to warmer temperatures. This action can only be undertaken by licensed ornithologists and hummingbird experts who possess valid state and federal permits.

Some areas of the U.S. do see hummingbirds normally over the winter. Several species of hummingbirds regularly overwinter along the Gulf Coast, southern Arizona, and south Florida. Anna's Hummingbirds are resident from northwestern Baja California along the Pacific coast to British Columbia, Allen's Hummingbirds are resident in coastal Southern California, and Costa's Hummingbirds are resident in Baja California, southeast California to western Arizona.

Refer to your field guide or Audubon's online field guide to learn about the winter range of particular species of hummingbirds.