

# THE BACK PORCH RANGER

by Melissa Kay Bishop

It is the time of year when, if you have the right environment, there are tiny iridescent beings chattering in high tiny voices as they flit about your flower garden. Moving at such speeds, they are only a blur. Chasing each other around in what appears to be a game; they are actually helping the flowers grow and defending their territory.

This is not a description of a warring troop of fairies, but of something no less amazing and magical. It is the hummingbird. A bird unlike any other with amazing abilities and work to do; they are more like fairies than song birds.

Hummers are the only bird that can fly backwards. They can also fly up, down, and even upside down. They are also the only bird that can suspend themselves

in the air and stay in one place. They do so by moving their wings through the air in a figure eight pattern like a swimmer treading water. They have the fastest wing beat of any bird, which accounts for them looking like a blur as they fly at speeds up to 30 mph and dive at an incredible 60 mph!

With such incredible feats of flights you might assume they are like most fast animals that can only keep high rates of speed for a short distance. But the Ruby Throated Hummingbird migrates from Canada to Panama which includes a non-stop 500 mile trek over the Gulf of Mexico.

There are 343 species of hummingbirds and all reside in the Western Hemisphere, which makes them the largest family of birds in

the sector. Although they have their trials of predators (which have a hard time catching them) and pesticides upon the flowers they pollinate, their numbers are strong. The female only has one brood per season and lays only two eggs, but each emerging baby hummer is expected to live to the ripe old age of ten.

The other nemesis to the hummingbird is one that comes from people with good intentions and a love of the little ones. It is well known that hummingbirds are attracted to the color red. When people put out hummingbird feeders, sometimes they buy hummingbird nectar that is colored red with a dye called Red Dye #40. It is made from coal, tar or petrochemicals which are proven to be carcinogenic to animals and

not good for people either. It is also unnecessary.

Most hummingbird feeders that you buy at the store are colored with red plastic parts to attract the hummers. You can save your money and possibly the hummingbird population by making natural nectar out of sugar



and water. Simply mix one part sugar to four parts water, shake or stir well and what you don't use, keep in the refrigerator for next time. Some will recommend that you boil the concoction, but I have found that unnecessary as well. There have even been studies that show hummingbirds prefer

clear nectar to a red one. Just clean out the feeder and put fresh nectar in at least every five days to avoid a bacteria build up.

To bring them to your yard and feeder, place red ribbons on the feeder pole to blow in the breeze. Or add the many plants that they are attracted to into your garden. Red salvia, lobelia, coral honeysuckle, hibiscus, butterfly bush, columbine, or delphinium will do. Any bright or red or cone shaped flower will signal a good snack for them. And since a single hummer will visit 1,000 flowers a day, plant plenty of

them.

It is also a good idea to put out more than one feeder. Hummingbirds are territorial and will chase off others from their nectar source. Every summer, there is always one that perches on the shepherd's hook where my hummingbird feeder hangs. He sits

hunched like a vulture protecting his larder. When another approaches, there is much chattering and the chase begins.

Give all passing hummers a chance by placing several out since one bird cannot protect them all. To attract a variety of species, place them at different heights as it appeals to their different preferences.

The hummingbird is a symbol of finding joy in what we do, to feed on the nectar of life. When one boldly hovers in front of your face, trying to decide if you are a flower or not, it is hard not to feel joyful.

*Melissa Kay Bishop is a journalist and wildlife hobbyist living in Oak Ridge, Tennessee. After years of volunteering and working with creatures great and small, she now chronicles the ones who visit her own yard. She can be reached at [backporchranger@gmail.com](mailto:backporchranger@gmail.com).*

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