

Ruby-Throated Hummingbird

Scientific Name: *Archilochus colubris*



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Introduction

The ruby-throated hummingbird is a member of one of the world's most unique family of birds. They were a surprise and curiosity to the European settlers in the U.S. who had never before seen hummingbirds; these birds are only found in the Western Hemisphere.

The ruby throat is among the smallest of birds, weighing less than an ounce. They are astounding flyers that can move forward and backward as well as hover in flight. They have been clocked flying up to 60 mph. The sound produced by its rapid wingbeats led to its name. You need only to sit near a flower being visited by a hummingbird to understand.

The ruby throat is native to Ohio and 99 percent of the hummingbirds you will see will be the ruby-throated. Occasionally, a rufous hummingbird makes an appearance in the state. Rufous hummingbirds have been documented at least 20 times in the state since 1985.

At least 319 species of hummingbirds have been reported in the world; these are primarily tropical birds and the number of species present declines the further north a site lies from the Equator.

The ruby-throated hummingbird is sometimes confused with the day-flying hummingbird moth. Reports of "flocks of baby hummingbirds" turn out to be this member of the sphinx moth family.

Because of its size, many people feel concern for this creature, but hummingbirds are actually quite hardy. They will range as far north as Nova Scotia and are quite capable of surviving short periods of wintery weather. Their fall migration can take them 600 miles from their summer range.

Description

The average ruby-throated hummingbird is 3 to 3 3/4 inches long, with a wingspan of 4 to 4 3/4 inches. The adult male has a red throat and a slightly forked tail. The red is not a pigmented color; its appearance is dependent upon the angle of light falling upon the bird's throat area. In dim or indirect light, the throat may appear black. Both sexes and all ages share the iridescent green back. Females and young of both sexes have white spots on the outer tail feathers. Juvenile males may show a few red throat feathers in late August and September, a month or two after they fledge. If observed at close range, juvenile birds can be identified by the light tan edges on their head feathers which give a scalloped appearance. These edges will wear off as the bird matures.

Males weigh about one-twelfth of an ounce, the equivalent of a penny; females are slightly heavier. As other birds do, hummingbirds fatten up prior to and during migration, and may double their normal weight as they prepare to head south.

The ruby throat is the only nesting hummingbird east of the Mississippi River. Its range extends west to the central areas of the Great Plains and north into central Canada, as far west as central Saskatchewan, east to the Atlantic Coast, as far north as Nova Scotia, south to the Gulf Coast and west along the eastern coast of Texas.

Habitats and Habits

Hummingbirds are seldom seen in large groups; they tend to be solitary creatures throughout their lives. Where concentrations occur at feeders, the birds are extremely aggressive and frequently challenge other birds at the site. There have been a few reports of large numbers of birds feeding at natural sites. In the spring, such an area might be meadows of penstemon (*Penstemon digitalis*—an Ohio native species); in late summer, lowland expanses of jewelweed.

The first arrivals of spring migrants occur in southern Ohio in late April with a peak in mid-May. The birds follow the blooming of columbine and lilac throughout the state. Fall migration south occurs over a longer period of time. In the fall migration, males leave first; most are gone by August 1. The majority of adult females are gone by late August. Juveniles straggle through the state, sometimes as late as mid-October, depending upon the weather. Occasionally, adult males appear late in the season as



red hot poker



jewelweed

well. Hummingbirds migrate under their own power. They do not travel on the backs of geese as an old tall tale indicates.

It appears that ruby throats are most common at areas where wooded edges are near water. Preferred flowers include jewelweed and cardinal lobelia, both wetland plants. They feed not only on flower nectar, but also on insects

and small spiders they pluck from flowers or catch in mid-air. They are also easily attracted to artificial feeders and will use many garden flowers as a source of nectar and insects.

Hummingbird feeders are increasingly popular with Ohio residents. Many people believe that they have the same bird returning to their feeder year after year. Banding studies confirm that there are, however, greater numbers of birds using a feeder than most people would believe. For example, at a site monitored in Columbiana County, 60 different birds were banded before one which had previously been handled was recaptured. If you watch a feeder, you might see as many as five or six birds at one time; it's unlikely that the same birds are there every time.

Peak activity periods at feeders are early morning and late evening. Many who maintain feeders report heavy usage before major thunderstorms.

Reproduction and Care of Young

Ruby-throated hummingbirds are polygamous; the male and female associate only for mating. Females incubate and rear the two offspring without assistance. In northern Ohio, most females are on nests by mid-June. Two broods may be produced in a year.

Two white eggs are produced, the size of sweet peas. The young hatch in 14 to 16 days and are altricial (born helpless). The young birds will fledge about 21 days after they hatch. When hummingbirds leave the nest, they are very close to full size.

This bird nests in trees, generally those at the edge of the woods or other opening, such as along a wooded stream side. If you are able to locate the tiny nest, which is the size of half an English walnut shell, you may well find nests in the same area in future years.

Viewing Opportunities

The ruby throat is found in varying numbers throughout the state. Viewing opportunities are limited primarily because of the difficulty in actually seeing this diminutive bird. Hummingbirds are often overlooked as they sit on utility wires along roadsides and on bare branches that provide a good view of their surroundings. Generally, the bird is seldom seen away from feeders except by careful observers. Where suitable habitat exists, feeders draw birds to locations where they can be easily viewed.

Feeding hummingbirds does require a certain commitment of time and attention to feeder conditions. Feeders should be thoroughly cleaned and maintained regularly. A mixture of one part sugar dissolved in four parts of water is an appropriate formula (see complete details for preparing this mixture at the end of this

note); prepared formulas are also available at many garden centers. Honey should not be used as it has been associated with a fungal disease when fed to birds in captivity.

If the fluid in your feeder looks cloudy or dirty, change it. If you wouldn't drink it yourself, you shouldn't feed it to the birds.



hummingbird moth
on garden phlox

To reduce aggression and conflict at feeders, several should be located around the yard, placed so that birds at one feeder cannot see birds at another feeder. If you have birds coming to your feeders, you can increase viewing opportunities by planting flowers such as coral bells, lilac, red hot poker, gladiolus, Mexican sunflower, trumpet vine, and scarlet runner beans.

Do Something Wild!

The ruby-throated hummingbird contributes to the diversity of wildlife in the state. And as indicated earlier, it uses wetland plants as a part of its diet. Many purchases of wetland habitat in the state have been funded through the Do Something Wild! state income tax checkoff program. Through the generosity of Ohio citizens, who either donated through the checkoff or made their direct contribution to the Endangered Species Special Account, the Division is able to undertake a variety of special projects that benefit wildlife diversity in the state. Besides the purchase of wetland habitat, the fund has been used to provide hummingbird-butterfly seed packets.

Tax time is not the only time you can help. Contributions to our Endangered Species and Wildlife Diversity Program are accepted throughout the year. To make a donation, please send a check to: Endangered Species Special Account, Ohio Division of Wildlife, 2045 Morse Road, Bldg. G, Columbus, Ohio 43229-6693. All contributions, whether made on your tax return or directly, are tax deductible.

At a Glance

Mating: Polygamous

Peak Breeding Activity: June and July

Incubation Period: 14-16 days

Young are Hatched: June and July

Clutch Size: 2 eggs

Young: Altricial, young leave nest at 20 to 22 days old

Number of Broods per Year: 2

Adult Weight: less than one ounce

Adult Length: 3-3 3/4 inches

Adult Wingspan 4- 4 3/4 inches

Life Expectancy in the Wild: 2-3 years

Migration Patterns: Seasonal resident; no documentation as to how far young go to establish their own territory.

Feeding Periods: Daylight hours

Typical Foods: Nectar, small insects, and spiders

Native to Ohio: Yes

Active or Potential Nuisance Species: No



penstemon



Recipe for Feeding

- *Mix one part white sugar to four parts water
- *Boil mixture for two to three minutes
- *Cool and fill feeder
- *Store unused portion in freezer for later use
- *DO NOT use honey; minimal red food coloring may be added to sugar water mixture but, is not necessary.

