



Tiny bird, BIG APPETITE

This small bird's whale of an appetite can be satisfied with feeders, native plants

By Jacelyn Downey

If fortunate enough to have hummingbirds whizzing to and through your property, you probably marvel at their voracious appetites and quick maneuvers.

Wyoming is home to several species. The three most common are the Rufus hummingbird (*Selasphorus rufus*), Broad-tailed hummingbird (*Selasphorus platycercus*), and Calliope hummingbird (*Stellula calliope*). See page 17 for more information about these birds.

How can you attract these amazing little fliers to your home? Start by hanging feeders. Planting native nectar-producing plants (see page 16 for suggestions) will do the most to not only entice but keep them coming back year after year.

Specialty Eaters

Hummingbirds specialize in eating nectar, evident by elongated bills ideal for probing tubular flowers. Although

FEATHERED LIGHTNING

Facts about these bustling birds:

- the hummingbird is the smallest bird and also the smallest of all animals with a backbone.
- a hummingbird has no sense of smell
- because a hummingbird can rotate its wings in a circle, they are the only bird that can fly forward, backward, up, down, sideways, and hover.
- to conserve energy while they sleep or when food is scarce, they can go into a hibernation-like state (torpor) where their metabolic rate is slowed to 1/15th of its normal rate.
- during migration, some hummingbirds make a non-stop 500-mile flight over the Gulf of Mexico.
- during courtship dives, a hummingbird can reach speeds up to 60 miles per hour and can average speeds of 20 to 30 miles per hour.
- hummingbirds are the second largest family of birds with 343 species.
- hummingbirds can beat their wings up to 80 times a second during normal flight and up to 200 times per second during a courtship dive.
- a hummingbird has a heart rate that can reach up to 1,260 beats per minute.

bills may vary slightly in size and shape, each protects a long and sensitive forked tongue, which a hummingbird uses to lick its nectar source, whether a flower or a feeder, anywhere from three to 13 times a second. The fork forms a trough that draws the nectar up by capillary action. Hummingbirds depend on the sugar-rich nectar for up to 90 percent of their diet; the rest consists of insects and pollen that provide essential protein. Because of their extremely high metabolism, hummingbirds have to feed about every 10 to 15 minutes.

Feeder Facts

Maintaining a backyard hummingbird feeder can provide the birds nectar critical to their survival, especially during fall when they need to double their body mass before migration. Contrary to a common fear, the extra food won't stop a hummer from migrating south when it's time for it to go.

– From *The Sibley Guide to Bird Life & Behavior*



A young hummingbird receives a meal snug in its unique nest.

Follow these steps to ensure your yard is a safe and nutritious stopover for hummingbirds:

- Instead of one large feeder, hang several smaller ones in different locations. Any variety will work. Keep the feeders far enough apart that the hummers cannot see one another; generally, one at each window. This will prevent one bird from dominating the rest. Be sure to place them high enough to be inaccessible to cats.
- Fill the feeders with sugar water made by combining four parts hot water to one part white sugar, boiled for one to two minutes and then cooled. NEVER use honey, which promotes the growth of harmful bacteria, or artificial sweeteners. Also, avoid red food coloring.
- Hang feeders in the shade to discourage fermentation and spoilage of the sugar solution.
- Be sure to change the sugar water regularly - before it gets cloudy, or about twice a week in warm weather.
- Clean feeders with a solution of one part white vinegar to four parts water about once a week. If the 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 feeder well with warm water three times before refilling with sugar solution.
- If you live in bear country, be sure to follow local regulations when it comes to feeders – you don't want to tempt bears!

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PLANTING FOR HUMMINGBIRDS

There is even more you can do to help these wonderful creatures thrive. Learn how to create a hummingbird-healthy habitat right in your own backyard!

Providing a feeder is a great way to attract hummingbirds but consider planting native trees, shrubs, and flowers. They will attract not only hummingbirds but bees, moths, and butterflies. Keep in mind it is important to avoid using pesticides when planting for wildlife.

Some Wyoming natives that attract hummingbirds are:

Hawthorn *Crataegus spp.*

Yucca *Yucca glauca*

Elderberry *Sambucus nigra*

Twinberry honeysuckle *Lonicera involucrata*

Western snowberry *Symphoricarpos occidentalis*

Bearberry *Arctostaphylos uva-ursi*

Rocky Mountain phlox *Phlox multiflora*

Blanketflower *Gaillardia aristata* Pursh

Blue Columbine *Aquilegia caerulea*

Crimson Columbine *Aquilegia Formosa*

Cutleaf coneflower *Rudbeckia laciniata*

Desert paintbrush *Castilleja angustifolia*

Wyoming paintbrush *Castilleja linariaefolia*

Yellow paintbrush *Castilleja flava*

Dotted gayfeather *Liatriis punctata*

Fireweed *Chamerion angustifolium*

Longleaf phlox *Phlox longifolia*

Spreading phlox *Phlox diffusa*

Bush penstemon *Penstemon fruticosus*

Platte River penstemon *Penstemon cyananthus*

Rydberg's penstemon *Penstemon rydbergii*

Whipple's penstemon *Penstemon whippleanus*

Mintleaf beebalm *Monarda fistulosa*

Skyrocket *Ipomopsis aggregata*

Wild Mint *Mentha arvensis*

Rocky Mountain Lily *Lilium philadelphicum*

For more information on planting for wildlife, go to <http://audubonwyoming.org/PDFs/WyomingWildscape-June2005.pdf>



Photo by J. Noecker

Calliope hummingbird *Stellula calliope*

Where to find them: Common summer resident found in willow and riparian areas of the northwestern mountain ranges of Wyoming.

Interesting facts: This is North America's smallest hummingbird. They weigh less than three \$1 bills. Male Calliope hummingbirds that are exposed to extreme cold temperatures at night will enter into a state of torpor, or temporary metabolic shutdown, to conserve energy.



Photo by J. Noecker

Rufous hummingbird *Selasphorus rufus*

Where to find them: Common fall migrant found in all the foothill and mountainous areas of Wyoming.

Interesting facts: Adult males are extremely territorial and will aggressively defend a feeder from all other hummingbirds. During their long migrations, Rufous hummingbirds make a clockwise circuit of western North America each year. They move up the Pacific Coast in late winter and spring, reaching Washington and British Columbia by May. As early as July, they may start south again, traveling down the chain of the Rocky Mountains.



Photo by A. Holloran

Broad-tailed hummingbird *Selasphorus platycercus*

Where to find them: Common summer resident that breeds in foothills and mountain ranges throughout Wyoming.

Interesting facts: They follow the blooming patterns of montane wildflowers, beginning at lower elevations and moving up to higher elevations as summer progresses. The female builds a nest out of lichens, cottonwood seeds, and plant fibers.

References:

Faulkner, Douglas W. 2010. *Birds of Wyoming*. Greenwood Village, Colo.: Roberts and Company Publishers.

<http://ces.uwyo.edu/PUBS/B986.pdf>

www.allaboutbirds.org