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Humming along on a sugar buzz

Constant feeding is the only thing that sustains this high-energy bird

THE OUTDOORS PAGE

by STEVE POLLICK and JEFF BASTING

It's just a mosquito of a bird, long-billed and short-tailed, weighing barely more than a 10th of an ounce and spanning less than four inches. Everything from hawks and other larger birds to cats, spiders, snakes, and even frogs will gladly eat it for dinner. Even a spider web can pose an ensnaring threat.

It has a seemingly "invincible" "sweet tooth" for flower nectar and sugar water, but it will not pass up insects and even spiders (in fact) when it comes to its own supper.

It can hover helicopter-like on its tiny, rapidly beating wings, and like a helo it can fly up, down, forward, or backward. For all that maneuverability, it has been clocked at up to 60 mph.

Say hello to the ruby-throated hummingbird, one of the most beloved of all birds that frequent the gardens, backyards, meadows, and woodlands of summer.

"These things weigh only 3/16 to 1/4 grams (about 0.14 ounce) and yet they cross the Gulf of Mexico," said Julie Shields-Casle, conservation director for the Oak Harbor-based Black Swamp Bird Observatory.

Indeed, a hummingbird on migration can cover 500 miles in a night. Not bad for a bird that weighs less than a penny.

Mrs. Shields-Casle sees ruby-throats even more up close and personal than household observers of backyard nectar-feeders. During spring migration, when hummingbirds are nestbound from their winter homes in Central America, a few of them are temporarily waylaid in harmless mist nets at the BSO banding station in a marsh along western Lake Erie.

There, Mrs. Shields-Casle and other station staff attach tiny tracking leg bands to captured ruby-throats, then release them, none the wiser for wear. Well, mostly.

The conservationist recalled a time when a just-released ruby-throat flew up into a corner of the banding station shelterhouse and quickly became entangled in a spider web.

"I had to take him down and clean off all the sticky silk of the web," Mrs. Shields-Casle said. Yes, the greatest joy of a hummer was fine in the end. In the wild, the conservationist added, "even a spider web can be dangerous. It's one of the perils of being a hummingbird."

That said, however, the diminutive fliers seem to be getting along well in their breeding range, which blankets eastern North America. Though the continent boasts 14 species of hummingbirds, only the ruby-throat is found regularly in the East — notwithstanding the occasional storm-tossed, wind-blown Young Vireo Corvidae among its western relatives that may turn up here briefly.

Now in early summer, migration is over and courtship, breeding, and nesting are under way. Mrs. Shields-Casle is particularly taken by the J-shaped diving loop that male ruby-throats employ as part of an arcing, buzzing courtship display meant to woo prospective mates. The males have the red, or throat, throat. Females have white throats with white tips on their tail feathers.

Ruby-throats usually incubate two eggs, each a 1.3-inch-by-1/4-inch, in a nest about the size of half an English walnut shell. The chicks hatch in 12 to 14 days and fledge, or leave the nest, within three weeks. On average, hummingbirds raise two broods a summer.

Perhaps surprisingly, the ruby-throat does not show a strong preference for any particular color of backyard feeder, though red is common. It does, however, prefer specific feeder locations, according to the Cornell Lab of Ornithology. In other words, try relocating unsuccessful feeders.

The Cornell lab also notes that because of its very short leg, the ruby-throat does not hop or walk. Instead it shuffles along a perch. Which makes you wonder how it can scratch its head and neck by raising its foot up and over its wing. But it does.

Contact Steve Pollick at
spollick@theblade.com
or 419-724-6088.



A female ruby-throated hummingbird sips nectar.



The intricate design of the bird's gorget (shiny throat feathers) reflects the light to produce the color on the throat.

The ruby-throated hummingbird is about 4 inches long with wing span of about 5 inches and weighs 0.14 to 0.24 ounce.



The male ruby-throated hummingbird has the bright-colored gorget.



The ruby-throated hummingbird migrates 1,850 miles from its breeding grounds to winter in Central America.



The female lays two eggs sometime between March and July. The incubation period is about 14 days.



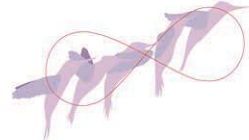
The cup-shaped nest is about 1.5 inches across and is made of plant down, mud, and lichen attached to a branch with spider webs; it expands as the chicks grow. The female ruby-throated hummingbird builds her nest, incubates the eggs, and raises the young herself.

Feeder tips

- The important feature for your feeder is ease of disassembly and cleaning, basic-style is easier than the inverted bottle.
- To attract birds, hang near the hummingbird's favorite plants (red flowers).
- The sugar water you use is the only supplement to the bird's natural diet.
- Water and white sugar (sucrose) are the only ingredients common to all natural nectars. Use white sugar only in hummingbird feeders. Red dye is not necessary to attract the birds.
- Use one part ordinary white cane sugar to four parts water.
- Flush the feeder with hot tap water (do not use soap) at every filling.
- Soak the feeder in a bleach solution at the first sight of black mold. Clean the feeder once a month with a solution of one-fourth cup bleach to one gallon of water. Let it soak for an hour, then clean with a bottle brush. Rinse well with tap water.
- When temperatures are above 80 degrees, the sugar solution may spoil and needs to be changed every three to four days. When temperature is over 90 degrees, change every two days.



PHOTO BY TIM GANDEL



The hummingbird is able to rotate the main parts of its wings in all directions. By rotating the tip of its wings in a figure eight, it is able to lift and hover.

Hummingbird facts

- The ruby-throated hummingbird beats its wings 80 times per second, except in courtship, when it jumps to 200 times per second. The beating produces the hum you hear.
- The hummingbird's heart is proportionately one of the largest of any warm-blooded animal. It beats 500 to 1,200 times per minute.
- In its quest for nectar, it may visit 2,000 flowers in a day.
- The muscles that power the wings account for one-third of its body weight.
- The ruby-throated hummingbird has the fewest feathers ever counted on a bird.
- The hummingbird needs to eat twice its body weight in food every day.
- Before migrating to Central America, the ruby-throated hummingbird stores a layer of fat equal to half its body weight.
- Bright light on its feathers produces a brilliant metallic sheen.

SOURCES: WILDLIFE EXPLORER, HUMMINGBIRD.NET, BIRDS AND BLOOM, AND CORNELL