

Flying Jewel: Ruby-throated Hummingbird



Ruby-throated hummingbird female feeding on the nectar of a cardinal flower.

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Looks can be deceiving, especially when it comes to the diminutive and delicate-looking ruby-throated hummingbird. This tiny bird is tough. Weighing in at not much more than a penny (1/10 of an ounce) and all of 3-1/2 inches long beak-tip to tail-tip, it flies thousands of miles from Central America to summer in Maine. Just the flight across the treacherous Gulf of Mexico is 500 miles and there is no stopping along the way. And, this tiny wonder must pack on the fat - increasing its weight by as much as a third - to have enough energy reserves to make the long-distance flight.

Maine welcomes the ruby-throat in May. I put up my feeders on May 1st each year and generally expect the hummingbirds to arrive during the next week to ten days. I saw them for the first time this year on 5/17. They stay just a few months. Males will start leaving in August; the females a few weeks later. The young of the year are the last to leave.

Ruby-throated hummingbirds (*Archilochus colubris*) are named for the brilliant red throat of the male. Females lack this coloration but tend to have more vibrant green backs than the males. The ruby-throat is Maine's only hummingbird, and our smallest bird. Earth's 320 species of hummingbirds are only found in North and South America. Fourteen summer in North America, with Arizona being the best place for viewing the most hummingbirds in the USA.



Here in Maine, you'll find them in open woodlands, forest edges, and frequenting meadows for the nectar-filled wildflowers. Their tiny walnut-size nests, lined with moss and held together with the sticky silken strands stolen from spider webs, are built atop tree branches. The nest is pliable and expands as the young grow. The female lays two pea-size eggs and is solely responsible for the care and feeding of

her young. She feeds on the nectar of flowers - especially tubular flowers, and small insects for protein. Hummingbirds routinely feed while in flight, hovering while drinking nectar and taking tiny insects while on the wing. To hover, their wings beat roughly 55 times in a second. During flight they beat 75+ times per second. Their amazing skeleton and musculature allow them to fly in any direction - even backwards! - plus stop in an instant and hover.

Ruby-throats are quite inquisitive. Once they are used to you, they will come quite close. I've had them fly up to my face, hover, and then fly to an empty feeder to show me I've been slacking on my feeder-filling duty. They have also admonished me for gardening near the late-summer blooming cardinal flower of which they want to take sips. I always follow their orders!

Interesting Facts

- Hummingbirds eat 1/2 their weight in nectar daily.
- A groove on each side of the tongue helps the hummingbird feed on nectar.
- Wingspan of 4-1/2 inches is longer than body length, though when folded back in the sitting position the wings do not reach the tip of the tail.
- The humming sound is from their wings. Their voice is high-pitched rapid twitter.
- Footless?! In the order of birds called Apodiformes, meaning without feet, the hummingbird actually has feet - but because they are so small, they are only good for perching. The hummingbird cannot walk or jump.
- Energy is conserved at night and through periods of cold weather by torpor. The hummingbird's metabolism slows: heart beats become extremely slow, body temperature falls, and it remains motionless until warm temperatures return.

Activities for Children & the Young at Heart

1. Can you flap your arms as fast as a hummingbird? How many flaps in 15 seconds?
2. If you were a bird, what would you use to make your nest and how big would it have to be?
3. Keep a journal of the birds you see around your house. Mark the day, time, weather, and anything that interests you about the bird - perhaps what it was doing, if it was singing, what plants it was near, or what it looked like. Have fun drawing too. Many birders keep journals that are mostly drawings with just a few written notes.

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- [Jocelyn Hubbell](#) Interpretive Specialist, Maine Bureau of Parks and Lands.