

Hummingbirds are Jewels on the Wing
By Vera Strader

Lavishly colored, hummingbirds are the smallest birds in the world, some weighing little more than a dime. Hummers are found only in the Western Hemisphere with many here in the Mother Lode.

Males are truly flashy dressers, considerably “better dressed” than females. Annas hummers are the most familiar with the males’ ruby-pink throat and head; Blue Chinned also frequent our neighborhoods. The increasingly rare Rufous with their distinctive reddish brown color migrate through in both spring and fall. Least common are Costas that sport an amethyst crown and throat and the tiny Calliope that looks as though red syrup has been dribbled down his throat.

When a male hummingbird finds a good nectar source, he aggressively defends it from all other hummers, chattering angrily and flying toward the intruder at top speed. While courting, the Annas perform mind-boggling skydives with a loud pop or whistle, or the dizzying “pendulum dance” swinging back and forth, wings abuzz, in front of his ladylove. The female singlehandedly builds and tends the nest and feeds the typical two babies.

THE ENDLESS QUEST. Hummers must have food, lots of food, to sustain their rapid metabolism and heart rate of up to over 1000 beats per minute. They eat often, perhaps every 10 minutes or so, and must tank up at the end of day to prepare for the long night. For protein, they scarf down numerous tiny insects and sip sweet flower nectar for energy.

You can entice hummers to your yard with sugar-water feeders. 1) Prepare the syrup with 1/4 cup white sugar to one cup boiling water; no food coloring. Store extra in the refrigerator. 2) To assure its freshness, replace sugar mixture in the feeder every three days or so, more often in warm weather. 3) Replenish feeders when empty; over-wintering hummers need nectar too. If you go away, recruit someone to care for your feeder(s) in your absence. 4) Select feeders that are easily cleaned and wash them often. To remove every speck of mold, soak in a mixture of half vinegar and half water. For extra cleansing, add some dry rice in a little water and shake well; rinse.

PLANT AND THEY WILL COME. To set a lavish hummingbird buffet with no scrubbing required, grow flowers. To nourish both resident and migratory birds, try to provide a variety of blossoms over a long period of time. When foraging, hummers must visit many blossoms, pollinating along the way. They may also eat the sweet honeydew produced by aphids and the fluid found in sapsucker wells.

Many flowers provide little or no nectar, especially newer hybrids. Good nectar flowers are often native to California, or to Australia where they are pollinated by moths.

Early California native bloomers include manzanita, wild currents and gooseberries (*Ribes*), followed by buckeye and monkey flowers (*Mimulus*). California fuchsia (*Zauchneria* or *Epilobium*) and autumn sage (*Salvia gregii*) are native fall bloomers.

Numerous other sages (*Salvias*), both native and exotic, entice hummers; as a bonus many resist deer. Look for Cleveland's (*S. clevelandii*), hummingbird (*S. spathacea*) and anise-scented (*S. guaranitica*) sages.

Other nectar plants include butterfly bush, *Agastache*, bottlebrush, trumpet vine, mimosa (*Albesia*), *Eucalyptus*, red-hot poker, honeysuckle, bee balm, *Penstemon*, *Weigela*, the airy 5-ft.-tall *Verbena bonariensis* and coral-bells. Annuals that hummers may also enjoy are foxglove, spider flowers, larkspur, some morning glories, hollyhocks and *Impatiens*.

As you plant for hummingbirds, you provide food for other pollinators and seed, berries and insects for songbirds too. Be sure to veto pesticides in and around your yard and you'll soon have a garden to delight both humans and a multitude of other creatures as well.

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