



BirdNotes

from Sapsucker Woods

Interpreting and conserving the earth's biological diversity through research, education, and citizen science focused on birds.

Attracting Hummingbirds

The tiniest birds in the world are also among the most fascinating and the easiest to watch, sometimes from inches away in your window feeders.

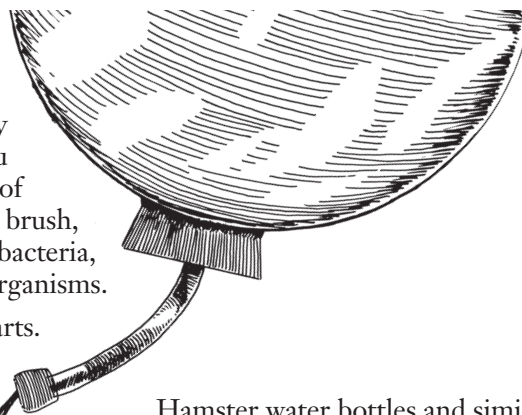
Feeding hummingbirds is fun and rewarding and, when done properly, can also make life easier for hummingbirds. Hummingbirds get quick energy from sugar-water feeders, energy that fuels their search for the insects and flowers which provide most of their nourishment.

Sugar water can be offered in anything from hamster water bottles to beautifully crafted blown-glass creations costing hundreds of dollars. Although many hummingbirds are named for rare jewels, they don't care about price. How can you choose feeders that are most beneficial for hummingbirds?

Selecting Feeders

The most important feature of a good hummingbird feeder is that it be easy to open and to clean. If you can't easily reach every bit of inside surface with a bottle brush, the feeder will soon foster bacteria, fungi, and other harmful organisms.

Feeders should have red parts. Flowers pollinated by hummingbirds are often red, and hummingbirds are attracted to that color.



Hamster water bottles and similar items are much more likely to attract hummingbirds if part of the glass is painted with red nail polish or something red is placed on them.

Some feeders come with bee guards—plastic screens that fit over the feeding ports. When these are yellow, they may actually attract yellow jacket wasps. Those feeders that come with bee guards tend to be rather drippy, and if solution drips

onto the bee guard, it will foster wasp visits rather than discouraging them. In basin feeders, the sugar water is often too far within for wasps to reach, though hummingbird tongues have no trouble, so these feeders are often the best choice for discouraging flying insect pests.

Some basin feeders have ant moats. Fill these with plain water to discourage ants while helping chickadees and other little birds that sometimes take drinks from the moats. A small dab of petroleum jelly around the hanging wire may also keep crawling insect pests away.

Hummingbirds are exceptionally territorial and often fight with one another. You will attract more hummingbirds that can feed with fewer disruptions if you place several small feeders around your yard rather than just one large feeder. Hummingbird sugar solutions should be changed fairly often, so unless you have a great many hummingbirds, smaller feeders are also less wasteful.

Filling the Feeders

It's easy to make your own hummingbird solution. Use granulated cane sugar and unsoftened, non-distilled hot drinking water. The ideal ratio is usually 1/4 cup of sugar per cup of water; your mixture should never be stronger than that during hot, dry weather. During cold, rainy weather, you can make it stronger, using up to 1/3 cup of sugar per cup of water. If you're having problems with insects, a solution of 1/5 cup of sugar per cup of water may discourage the insects without losing the

EVAN BARBOUR



What hummingbirds have been found in your state?

Go to www.ebird.org and see! Click on "View and Explore Data," and then click on "all-time first/last records." Enter your state and scroll down to hummingbirds. You may be surprised!

hummingbirds' interest. The concentration of sugars in natural flower nectar varies within this range.

Many people boil sugar water before using. This isn't necessary if your drinking water is safe for you as long as you change the solution every few days. Hummingbird bills and tongues quickly introduce microorganisms that cause spoilage anyway. Leftover solution can be refrigerated for up to two weeks.

Honey fosters bacterial and fungal growth and ferments faster than sugar water, so should never be used in hummingbird feeders. Red food coloring is completely unnecessary and may be harmful. Commercial mixtures with added vitamins and minerals (and often food coloring) are a needless expense, and mixtures formulated for captive hummingbirds spoil within hours. Hummingbirds that frequent feeders get a balanced diet by also eating many natural foods, including nectar and plenty of insects.

Placing the Feeders

Hummingbirds prefer feeders near trees and shrubs, where they can perch to rest and observe their surroundings, and can feed on nearby natural food between visits. Plants with red, tube-shaped blooms, such as bee-balm, trumpet vine, and jewelweed, are very attractive to hummingbirds, as are trees with sap wells drilled by sapsuckers.

Set feeders in the coolest areas of your yard and where there is some protection from wind. Hummingbirds are unusually fearless and come readily to window feeders. You can hang hooks into your window framing or use feeders that attach directly on glass with suction cups.

If bees or wasps discover your feeder, you may confuse them, at least for a while, by moving the feeders to new places, often just a few feet away.

Maintaining Hummingbird Feeders

Bacteria and fungi grow more rapidly as the temperature rises. When the thermometer reaches 80 degrees Fahrenheit, scrub your feeders with a clean bottle brush and very hot water and refill every three days. When it's over 90 degrees, sugar water may be spoiled in two days or less. Even when temperatures are cool it's best to clean feeders and change the solution fairly often. If you see any sign of cloudy water or black mold, discard the solution and clean the feeder immediately.

Always rinse feeders in hot or boiling water before adding fresh solution. At least once a month, and immediately if black mold is detected, soak emptied feeders for one hour in a weak vinegar solution and then scrub with a clean bottle brush. Rinse well with running water before refilling.

Helping Hummingbirds

Fostering locally-native plants attractive to hummingbirds will provide an abundance of natural food for them and give you more opportunities to view these charismatic creatures at close range. Learn about the best plant choices from local conservation organizations.

Hummingbirds are often drawn to sapsucker drill holes for insects and running sap, so try not to discourage these interesting woodpeckers.

Setting out banana peels near hummingbird feeders will foster fruit flies and other nutritious soft-bodied insects which hummingbirds eat. It's exciting to watch hummingbirds darting about chasing down these tiny flying insects.

Don't use insecticides or herbicides anywhere in your yard. Hummingbirds construct their nests with spider silk. Fostering spiders will both encourage hummingbirds to nest near you and control many insect pests naturally.

Never allow cats to roam anywhere near where hummingbirds feed or rest.

Learn More!

www.birds.cornell.edu/AllAboutBirds

www.hummingbirds.net

www.sabo.org/hummers.htm

Enhance Your Enjoyment of Birds and Help Promote a Better Understanding of Them

Join the Cornell Lab of Ornithology. Your annual membership helps support research, education, and citizen-science projects, including studies about the movements of birds and the changes in their numbers over time. You'll receive subscriptions to our award-winning magazine, *Living Bird*, our newsletter, *BirdScope*, and more.

Call (800) 843-2473 (if calling from the United States) or (607) 254-2473 (international calls). Or visit www.birds.cornell.edu.

© 2008 Cornell Laboratory of Ornithology.

