

CONSERVING RUBY-THROATED HUMMINGBIRDS



Male ruby-throated hummingbird and female (inset)

Photo sources: Brenda Penak (male) and Hannah van den Heuvel (female)

IDENTIFICATION

The hummingbird family contains the smallest members of the North American native bird community. Prince Edward Island is in the breeding range of just one – the Ruby-throated Hummingbird – which averages a mere 9 cm in length and weighs 3 grams. Males sport a striking red iridescent throat, metallic green head and back, white breast, greenish-gray abdomen and forked tail. Females look very much the same but without the red throat; their throat and abdomen are white, their tail rounded. Young birds will sometimes show streaking on their throats.

NATURAL HISTORY

Ruby-throated hummingbirds that breed in PEI fly up to 5,000 km to reach their wintering grounds in Mexico and Central America. They are primarily a forest bird, but will also use gardens, stream and wetland edges, and shrubby forest margins to feed and nest.

Ruby-throated Hummingbirds are fierce defenders of territories. Males defend a food source, whereas females defend their nest site as well as food sources. When birds fly in a U-shaped pattern near you, it is a sign that they are upset and defending their turf.

Males and females only pair up briefly to mate. The male attracts multiple mates with impressive side to side flights in front of the perching female. The female alone builds a nest and rears the young.

Females often to build their nests in maples or birches. PEI native species include red maple, sugar maple, paper birch, yellow birch, gray birch and bog birch. Red maples have the added advantage of being an important early spring source of nectar as they are one of the first species to flower in our forests. Depending on the habitat, hummers may also use poplar, hemlock, spruce, pine or some shrubs to nest.

Down from plants like dandelion, thistle, cattail and fireweed form a good portion of the nest cup, held together and bound to a branch with spider silk. The exterior is well camouflaged with bits of lichen, moss, bark, coniferous needles and bud scales to match the nest tree selected. The nest is the size of a walnut and usually 1 – 15 meters off the ground, hidden with the further protection of leaves from a neighbouring branch. Setting out to find a hummer nest is quite a challenge!



Ruby-throated hummingbird in nest. Photo by Greg Gilbert (Flickr Commons)

Females lay two white eggs the size of beans and incubate them for 11 – 14 days. Once the chicks hatch, she feeds them in the nest for 14 – 28 days until their flight feathers are big enough to support them. Hummingbirds feed on flowers by hovering and using their long tongue to reach the nectar at the base. They also eat insects for protein and minerals, particularly during early development. As well as tree sap from woodpecker drillings and any insects that get caught in it. When you see hummers perched and still, they are not truly resting; they are giving their tiny digestive system time to extract the sugar from the water in nectar and freeing up some of their very limited body space for more nectar!



Ruby-throated hummingbird range.
Photo source: Wikimedia Commons

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ARE RUBY-THROATED HUMMINGBIRD POPULATIONS HEALTHY?

The species is ranked as secure in Canada and North America. However, that ranking is based on limited data because there are not many banding or other monitoring studies on which to estimate numbers. Forest habitat loss in wintering and breeding grounds, pesticide use and increasing extreme weather events are all current factors that likely impact on these tiny neotropical migrants.

BUILDING A HUMMER-FRIENDLY YARD

Acres of lawn does little to support hummers or other wildlife. Planting a variety of trees, shrubs and wildflowers instead can help them meet their nesting, feeding and resting needs. Try to avoid exotic species if you can and particularly invasive species. A list of native tree, shrub, vine and wildflower species, including bloom times, is below. If you are limited in space or there's a gap in blooming period for plants in your yard, hummers will use artificial feeders as well. Please also keep cats inside and avoid use of pesticides.

TREES

Red Maple (<i>Acer rubrum</i>)	Early spring
Serviceberry (<i>Amelanchier</i> sp.)	Early spring

SHRUBS

Canada Fly Honeysuckle (<i>Lonicera canadensis</i>)	Spring
Northern Bush Honeysuckle (<i>Diervilla lonicera</i>)	Summer
Rhodora (<i>Rhododendron canadense</i>)	Spring
Red Osier Dogwood (<i>Cornus sericea</i>)	Early Summer
Red Elderberry (<i>Sambucus racemosa</i>)	Spring
Sheep's Laurel (<i>Kalmia angustifolia</i>)	Summer

VINES

Virginia Clematis (<i>Clematis virginiana</i>)	Summer
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WILDFLOWERS

Harlequin Blue Flag (<i>Iris versicolor</i>)	Early Summer
Fireweed (<i>Chamerion angustifolium</i>)	Summer
Showy Primrose (<i>Oenothera biennis</i>)	Mid-summer
Swamp Milkweed (<i>Asclepias incarnata</i>)	Summer
White Turtlehead (<i>Chelone glabra</i>)	Mid- to late-summer
Spotted Joe-Pye Weed (<i>Eupatorium maculatum</i>)	Mid- to late-summer
Cut-leaved Coneflower (<i>Rudbeckia laciniata</i>)	Late Summer

HUMMER SUPPLEMENTAL FEEDERS

You can provide a clean, regular source of nectar for Ruby-throated Hummingbirds by making your own sugar and water solution.

Mix 1 part white table sugar (1/4 cup) to 4 parts water (1 cup). Do not use red dye, honey or other sweeteners.

Nectar made with boiling water may be stored in the fridge for up to two weeks. If your tap water is chlorinated, it should be boiled prior to mixing. Unchlorinated hot tap water may be used, but should not be stored longer than 5 days in the fridge.

Mold can grow quickly in sugar water, especially in warm weather, and can harm hummingbirds. Clean feeders by scrubbing with soapy water or mild vinegar solution, rinse well and refill with fresh nectar every 3 days.



Photo by: Michelle Reynolds (Wikimedia Commons)



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