

# Hangin' with hummingbirds

By Linda Roe

A blur of wings and sound flies past your ear. Before your brain registers what your eyes have seen, she's gone, heading for a sweet meal or defending her buffet table from any interlopers. Hummingbirds do not share well.

Feisty for such small birds, hummingbirds measure three to four inches long from head to tail, and weigh no more than a nickel. They can fly more than 25 miles per hour and expend more energy for their weight than any other animal. Because they use so much energy, they must eat over half their body weight in food, and drink eight times their body weight — every day. A hummingbird will eat every 15 to 20 minutes, then perch and digest the food.

Besides nectar, they eat a smorgasbord of insects and other bugs. Hummingbirds catch the insects in mid-air or pick them off of plants, which is a great reason to encourage their visits. In the evening, they fill their throat pouches, called "crops," before night-fall, then digest food slowly throughout the night. This could be the reason that they are more active around feeders in late evening and early morning.

"It's not the size of the bird in the fight ..." Hummingbirds are very territorial and will defend a good food source from birds many times their size. I've seen a hummingbird take on two finches and a robin, and drive them away from favorite flowers. This is why it is not a good idea to site your hummingbird feeder near your other birdfeeders.

Hummingbirds' agility is due to the unique design of their wings, which rotate from the shoulder, allowing them to get power from both the up and down strokes. They can fly backwards, sideways, and straight up and down. The males of many hummingbird species use a series of amazing dives and loops in their mating displays.

Once you see a perch, you can identify a variety of hummingbirds, including a Rufous or Anna's. Rufous hummingbirds are rusty red brown with a red throat. Anna's hummingbirds are green with a red crown and throat that might appear black in low light. Males are more brightly colored than the females and are easy to identify. The females are trickier to identify, with Rufous females having rusty brown sides. Female Anna's are green with a small red dot at the throat.

Rufous are summer visitors only, arriving in spring and leaving in fall. They fly all the way

to Mexico and back, so when they arrive the spring, that feeder better be ready. Anna's are nonmigratory, so if you put in winter blooming plants, such as Mahonia "Charity," you will begin to see more of them.

How do Anna's survive the Pacific Northwest winter? They slow their metabolism down in cold weather, entering a state called "torpor." Hummingbirds are well worth their cost in feeders and sugar water in terms of entertainment value.

Besides hanging and maintaining feeders, you can attract hummingbirds by setting out a buffet of their favorite flowers. Start with red bloomers to attract their attention. Then try a pot of bright orange Salvia, red petunias or fuchsias. Once the birds show up for dinner, they are not picky eaters and will visit flowers of many colors, if they have high nectar content. They prefer tubular shaped flowers because their long beaks and tongues are suited to draw nectar from them.

Be sure to plant for a succession of bloom throughout the year to keep the hummingbirds around. Red flowering currants and Oregon grape are good early starters, followed by honeysuckle, columbine, and fuchsia and petunia baskets. Then you can plant a buffet of summer blooming perennials. Many summer annuals and perennials will bloom well into the fall. As the flowers decrease in num-



PHOTO BY TOM ROE

ber, keep the feeders clean and full. Along with something sweet to eat, hummingbirds are also attracted to moving water and will fly through spouting fountains and sprinklers.

Hummingbirds also need to be safe. Be very careful with chemicals, which can poison your plant nectar, along with killing your "critters." Also, if you have outdoor cats, use only tall hummingbird plants, such as crocosmia, or hanging baskets, lest you have a bird buffet of a different sort.

Enjoy and observe your birds. Learn more about these feisty flyers and you will always be entertained. ■

Information courtesy of Wight's Home & Garden, 5026 196th St. S.W., Lynnwood. Contact them at (425) 775-3636 or [www.wights.com](http://www.wights.com).

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