

Ruby-throated Hummingbird

Archilochus colubris



Far left: male. Near left: female. Above, nest with bill showing. Right: feeding.



Ruby-throated Hummingbirds (RTHU) are the most widely distributed of the world's 339 species of hummingbirds, all of which only occur in the Western Hemisphere.

The characteristic humming sound of each hummingbird species is determined by the speed of its wing beats. The extremely rapid wing beats require high metabolic rates to support hovering flight.

RTHUs measure 3 to 3-1/2 inches long and weigh just over a tenth of an ounce. They must eat twice their body weight each day. Females are on average 15-20% larger than the males.

Most hummingbirds die in their first year; those that don't live an average of around three years. The oldest known RTHUs are listed at about nine years (female) and around five years (male). The higher mortality in males may be due to loss of weight during the breeding season due to the high energy demands of defending a territory followed by energetically costly migration.

Ruby-throated Hummingbirds are solitary and adults typically only come into contact for the purpose of mating. They breed between March and July, with mid-May being the height of the breeding season.

Males return to the breeding area in the spring and establish a territory before the females arrive. Males are highly territorial and communicate with each other primarily through vocalizations. If a neighboring male intrudes on a male's territory, the resident male emits a single

note which is repeated at increasing volume. If the intruder does not leave the territory, the resident male will chase him, and if needed, jab him with his bill or strike with his feet

When the females return, males court females that enter their territory by performing courtship displays.

These include erecting their red throat feathers and harassing the female, performing a "dive display" by flying in looping dives above the female's head, and if the female perches, flying in very rapid horizontal arcs about 18-20 inches in front of the female. During these displays, the male's wings can beat up to 200 times per second (as opposed to the normal 90 beats per second). If the female is receptive to the male, she may give a "mew" call and assume a solicitous posture with her tail feathers cocked and her wings drooped.

The pair does not establish a lasting bond; they separate after copulation and females provide all the parental care.

The female selects a nest site and builds the nest which is usually near the tip of a downsloping branch, below a leaf canopy, and above a fairly open area. Nests are constructed of plant material held together with spider webs and pine resin and decorated with lichens.

When the nest is complete, two eggs are usually laid. The female incubates them for 10 to 14 days. Chicks are altricial at hatching and leave the nest around three weeks later. The female continues to feed the chicks for up to a week after they fledge. They are sexually mature

around one year old.

Ruby-throated Hummingbirds are often thought of as exclusively nectar eaters, but some authorities think of them more as insectivorous birds that happen to also eat nectar.

Most nectar contains only sugars (carbohydrates) and does not comprise a well-balanced diet. As warm-blooded vertebrates, hummingbirds need to ingest proteins that can be converted into muscle, feathers, and other body parts. Fats are also necessary, particularly as hummers store energy in preparation for lengthy migratory flights.

The hummingbird's bill is long and thin and can open far enough to capture mosquitoes, spiders, gnats, and small flies and bees which provide the needed fats and proteins.

To sip nectar, the hummingbird laps up liquids just as a dog or cat by rapidly sticking its tongue in and out, about 2-4 times per second. This action is facilitated by feathery edges on the tongue, which is also split slightly at the tip, allowing the ends to overlap slightly and make a shallow "spoon."

At Corkscrew, Ruby-throated Hummingbirds take nectar from a variety of flowering plants including the different *Tillandsia* species for which they are the primary pollinators.

Fast fact

- At rest, the hummer's heart beats about 250 times per minute. When flying, the heart beats around 1,220 times per minute.