

Those Hungry Hummers

It's noon, you're hungry and ready for lunch. Imagine for a moment that once you finish, you'll have to eat again at 12:15, then again at 12:30 - and on average, every 15 minutes thereafter - just to survive. In fact, you consume so much energy with your normal activity that if you don't slow your metabolism somehow, or eat every 15 minutes - you'll die.

Better fatten yourself up a bit while food is available. Nighttime is coming on, and you can't maintain this continuous feeding schedule overnight. Will you even last the night? What about tomorrow? And that 2000-mile trek you do every late summer to Panama? By the way, you don't have transportation, and all the food stores are miles away.

But you're not human. You're a hummingbird, and it's 12:15 PM. Time to eat. Again.

Now that this exercise is over, aren't you relieved you're not a hummingbird?

Roughly three inches long and weighing in just under ½ ounce, these iridescent wonders grace our backyards with their humming wingbeats (averaging 55 beats per second!) and stunning upward, downward and backward aerial displays. Moving that quickly and traveling as far as they do (often 2000 miles or more) takes massive energy from the standard macronutrients - carbohydrates, proteins and fats - which they consume in the form of nectar, tree sap, pollen and insects. Their long, retractable, fringed and forked tongues lap nectar at 13 licks per second (all while hovering in the air...what coordination!), and will also consume insects in the air, as well as those trapped in the nectar.

Of the over 300 species of hummingbirds, 12 are migratory - flying individually (not in flocks, but males first, then females) to tropical climates during the winter months, then returning north in the spring and summer. The ruby-throated and rufous hummingbirds are most commonly seen in Oklahoma, although in the western part of the state, the black-chinned and broad-tailed may also be seen.

Attracting these magical creatures takes a bit of planning, but witnessing these miracles in motion make it well worth the effort.

Your backyard habitat should include food, water and protection. Placing multiple, non-competing feeders and planting native nectar-producing plants are best; those with tubular corollas are favorites. The water they consume comes mostly from dew and droplets on leaves; the presence of water features in their habitat mainly supports the diversity of insects as their food source. Finally, although hummingbirds have adapted to many places, areas with mature trees and shrubs for nesting and roosting activities and predatory protection are best received. In fact, hummingbirds are extremely territorial with other birds and insects when competing for a single food source, so hosting feeders and abundant plantings will make your backyard a favorite destination for these beautiful traveling wonders.

For more details, please see the following OSU fact sheet, and other informative sites:
<http://factsheets.okstate.edu/documents/hla-6435-landscaping-and-gardening-for-birds/>
<https://defenders.org/hummingbirds/basic-facts>
<http://www.rubythroat.org/RTHUMain.html>