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# Rufous Hummingbird

*Selasphorus rufus*

by J.M. Jones and S. Sells

**H**ummingbirds are among the smallest birds in the world, only 3 to 4 inches long and about  $\frac{1}{10}$  ounce. They may be small, but these beautiful birds are easy to see and fun to watch.

Hummingbirds feed on nectar and small insects. They get most of their water from nectar.

Rufous hummingbirds migrate to warm climates in the fall because there is no nectar in northern climates during the fall and winter. From February through May, they travel from Mexico to North America, flying almost exclusively along the West Coast. The trip is timed with the blooming of manzanita, whose nectar is one of their favorite foods.

The fall, or southern, migration follows a different route, from June through October. It leads through the Rocky Mountains, where the birds stop in September to feed on flowers in mountain

meadows. Hummingbirds fly for several hours before stopping for as long as a week to rest and replenish their energy.

Hummingbirds may live up to 5 years or more. They are able to live this long partly because they can slow down their bodies at night and in cold weather. At these times, they go into a trancelike state and may seem to be dead because they are stiff and may not breathe. This state is called torpor.

During the day, a hummingbird's heart beats more than 1,200 times per minute, and the birds need to feed about every 10 minutes. During torpor, their heart rate can slow to 50 beats per minute, slower than most humans'. If you find a hummingbird that looks dead, leave it alone because it may only be in a torpor state.

Despite their ability to go into a state of torpor in cold weather, weather probably is the main threat to hummingbirds. They cannot survive long if they are caught by bad weather during migration, nor can they survive in very wet or dry spells. If flowers die in the heat, hummingbirds may not get enough food.

Hummingbirds also face other threats. Cats may pounce on them, which is one reason it is best to keep cats indoors. Some pesticides also affect hummingbirds if the birds eat nectar and bugs that have been sprayed. Occasionally, they even become caught in a spider's web when collecting webs for their nests.



Photo: Rob and Ann Simpson

Hummingbirds may fly thousands of miles during their yearly migration.

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## Species description

Male and female hummingbirds have different colors. Male hummingbirds are brighter in color than females. Males have a rufous (rusty red) or sometimes greenish back; a rufous head, sides, tail, and lower belly; a white chest; and a bright orange-red throat, which is called a gorget. When sunlight catches the feathers on the chin and neck, they appear a bright, flaming red. The males use their gorget to attract mates and keep intruders away.

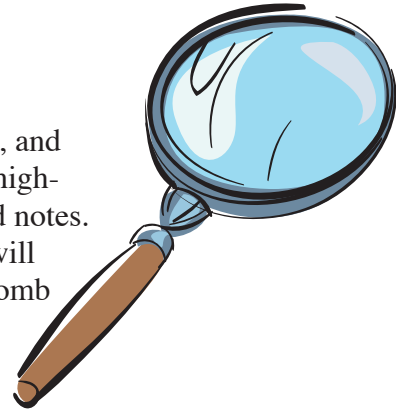
Females are green from their forehead down to their tail. Their chest and tip of their tail is white, and their belly and the rest of their tail is rufous colored. They also have a few rufous spots on their throats.

Hummingbirds are classified as songbirds, but they don't sound like most songbirds. Rufous hummingbirds make a sort of kissing sound, with high-pitched notes. Often when you see a hummingbird, you will hear a loud humming sound, which is made by their rapidly flapping wings.

Hummingbirds defend their territory with flight displays, loud



buzzes, and short, high-pitched notes. They will dive-bomb other birds to



chase them away and are amazing to watch.

Rufous hummingbirds begin nesting as early as April in warmer areas, or as late as July in their northern range. They use small pieces of plant down and other soft materials for their nest and then hold the materials together with natural “glue”—spider webs!

The nests are tiny—only about 1½ inches across—with just enough room for two small baby hummingbirds. Sometimes the female rebuilds a nest on top of her previous year's nest if she likes the location.

After about 2 weeks of incubating by the female (sitting on eggs), the baby birds hatch with closed eyes and very few feathers. The mother must feed the babies tiny insects and regurgitated nectar regularly for the first few weeks.

As the babies grow, they may outgrow the tiny nest and end up balancing on the rim of the nest until they are ready to fledge (leave the nest) at about 3 weeks. Rufous hummingbirds may have two broods each breeding season, unlike most hummingbirds, which have only one.



## Where they live and why

In the spring and summer, rufous hummingbirds live along the West Coast from southern Alaska through Canada, Washington, Oregon, and into northern California, as well as western Idaho and

Montana. Most hummingbirds migrate (fly south) for the winter. A few live along the Gulf Coast during the winter, but most travel to Mexico and southern California to find warmer weather.



## Creating habitat

Hummingbirds are attracted to gardens with red, pink, and orange flowers. A garden with a variety of sunny and shady areas, along with flowers and trees of different heights and bloom cycles, will keep hummingbirds in the area longer and may coax them into nesting nearby.

Hummingbirds enjoy a variety of flowers. Some flowering plants that they especially like are bleeding hearts, red-flowering currant, salmonberry, columbine, fuchsias, and orange honeysuckle.

You can hang a hummingbird feeder on a tree as extra food. The nectar is easy to make—just follow the recipe on this page!

Hummingbirds like to bathe in birdbaths. You can scatter some rocks in a corner to form a shallow pool for them. Make sure the water is only 1 to 2 inches deep; otherwise, they could drown.

Hummingbirds are attracted to gardens with red, pink, and orange flowers. A



Photo: Corel Corporation

A feeder can attract hummingbirds so you can enjoy their antics in your yard.

### Hummingbird nectar

- 1 part cane sugar
- 4 parts water






Boil for 1 minute (on the stove, because microwaves may decrease nutritional value of the nectar). Let the mixture cool to room temperature before filling the feeder. You can store the rest in the refrigerator. Be sure to clean the feeder and put new sugar water in it every 4 to 5 days. We don't want our feathered friends to get sick from mold. And, just as a precaution, don't use red food coloring or any sweetener besides cane sugar. Anything artificial or other types of sweeteners could make the birds very sick and might even kill them.

Photo: Hugh P. Smith, Jr.



Hummingbirds are easy to see when they perch on the tip of a branch in the sunlight.

## Fun facts

-  Hummingbirds weigh less than a nickel.
-  Hummingbird eggs are the size of a jellybean and are always laid in pairs.
-  The heart of a hummingbird beats 1,260 times per minute.
-  Hummingbirds are the only birds that can fly backwards.
-  Hummingbirds migrate up to 3,000 miles.

## Learn more!

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