

Hummingbirds

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Washington's four species of hummingbirds are only 3-4 inches long. They expend more energy for their weight than any other animal worldwide. This energy is used mainly for flying and keeping warm.

Hummingbirds are living helicopters, able to hover, fly straight up and down, sideways, backwards and upside down. Their wings rotate from the shoulder, providing power from downbeats and upbeats. Average flight speed is 27 miles per hour and they can travel up to 50 miles per hour, their wings beating 70-80 times per second.

Females build the golf ball sized nest and feed the young. White, pea-sized eggs incubate 14-21 days. Hatchlings leave the nest after 25 days. Hummingbirds eat flower nectar for instant energy, and insects for protein. Their high energy demand met by eating more than half their weight in food and drinking up to 8 times their body weight in water every day. In cooler climates like Washington, hummingbirds gather food in their crops (throat pouches) before dark. Through lowering their heart rate and body temperature, and slow digestion of their gathered food, they stay warm through the night.

Feeders must be red, easy to clean and have multiple ports. Clean feeders every 4-5 days with hot water to prevent mold. Solutions can be purchased or made using a 1 part sugar to 4 parts water. Red coloring isn't necessary; feeders already have red on them to attract hummingbirds. Don't use honey or artificial sweeteners. Honey helps fungus grow and contains botulism toxins that are deadly. Birds may starve to death eating artificial sweeteners because they contain no calories.

Place the feeder where you can watch it and where it can be easily reached for cleaning and refilling. Shady spots are best for keeping the sugar solution cool, which keeps mold growth down. Hummers tend to fight over feeders hung close together. Placing them far apart or out of sight of each other will attract more birds. Nectar-producing blossoms planted near feeders will provide insects and natural nectar for a balanced diet.

Go to the Master Gardener website (<http://mq.jefferson.wsu.edu/>) for a list of plants that attract hummingbirds.