

“Ruby-throated Hummingbird” by Sally Cureton

Many of our summer birds have finished raising their young for the year, and are getting ready to head south. One of the birds with the longest migration route is also the smallest, the **ruby-throated hummingbird**. Some of these birds will migrate around the Gulf of Mexico, through Texas and northern Mexico to Central America. Others will fly from Florida across the Gulf of Mexico to the Yucatan Peninsula. Just to fly across the Gulf of Mexico is a trip of 500-600 miles. They will travel at a speed of about 30 miles per hour. This long trip over the ocean accounts for many hummingbird deaths. That’s why it is so important for them to stoke up before they leave. Generally they are about 3.5 inches in length and weigh 0.1 ounce. However, before making their journeys, they will double their weight for the long flights.

There are sixteen species of hummingbirds in the United States, but the ruby-throated is the only one found in the eastern half of the country. They are iridescent green with a black throat patch that reflects bright red in the sunlight. Their nest is no bigger than a ping pong ball and their eggs are the size of jelly beans. They generally lay 2 eggs which they incubate for about 2 weeks and will have two broods per year. The babies will fledge in about 14-18 days. Hummingbirds do not pair up for any length of time. They have contact only briefly during mating, then the female goes off by herself to raise the young. The male will mate with other females. An amazing set of photos of hummingbird babies can be found at the following site

<http://community.webtv.net/Velpics/HUM>

In addition to flower nectar, hummingbirds will also feed on small insects, including spiders. Amazingly, in addition to being able to hover, they can fly up and down, and are the only birds to fly backward. When hovering, their heartx will beat 1,260 times a minute and they will breathe 250 times a minute. However, they have the ability to become torpid at night; they let their body temperature drop until it is close to that of the surrounding air. This greatly reduces their metabolic rate and helps them to conserve energy - especially useful when surviving periods of food shortage. At their active rate, they are always only a few hours from starving to death. Generally, they must feed on copious quantities of nectar. So let’s get those hummingbird feeders up and keep them filled!

On a recent trip to the U.S. Botanical Gardens in Washington, DC, I picked up a brochure on the Center for Plant Coservation. The mission of this unique organization is to conserve and restore the rare native plants of the United States. Founded in 1984, the center has its headquarters in St. Louis, Missouri and consists a network of more than

30 participating botanical institutions. These institutions maintain a collection of material and seeds representing native, imperiled plants in this country. Their scientists work to stabilize current populations of plants and to reintroduce plants to their appropriate habitats. The current collection totals more than 600 of the country's most imperiled native plants. Estimates are that an additional 1,000 U.S. plants need to be secured immediately.

According to the Center, each of the 50 states is home to at least one imperiled native plant species, and one in 10 native plants is of conservation concern. Of all US plant species, 15 percent have experienced steep declines or are considered at-risk. These plants are threatened by invasive species, habitate loss, over-collection and disease. To learn more about this valuable organization you can go to <http://www.centerforplantconservation.org>. It is a good feeling knowing that our Rockingham Springs Arboretum is exclusively native plant species.

Happy wildlife viewing and gardening!