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Feeding the Hummingbirds

By LeAnn R. Ralph

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by: **LeAnn R. Ralph**

Early in May here in west central Wisconsin, I can count on seeing a Ruby Throated Hummingbird hovering in front of my kitchen window, flitting back and forth, as if to say, "there was a hummingbird feeder RIGHT HERE last year. Where is it?"

And then I know it is time to put out hummingbird nectar. I feed a 3-to-1 mixture of water and sugar (3 cups of water and 1 cup of sugar brought to a boil and cooled to room temperature). After the hummingbirds' long trip from South America, they are thin and hungry.

The general rule-of-thumb is a 4-to-1 mixture, but to start out in early spring I always use a 3-to-1 mixture. Later on in the summer, when there are more flowers available, I switch to a 4-to-1 mixture.

I know it is important to wash the hummingbird feeder when I fill it to clean out any mold. I know it is also important to thoroughly rinse the hummingbird feeder when I am finished cleaning it to remove any soap or other chemicals.

If the feeder has visible mold, I use a bleach solution (1 teaspoon of bleach to several cups of water) to kill off the mold and mildew. Then I rinse the feeder thoroughly, under running water, for several minutes with hot water and for several minutes with cold water.

The best hummingbird feeder I've found is a Rubbermaid feeder. It holds two cups of nectar, and it is as sturdy now as it was when I bought it four years ago. Other hummingbird feeders cracked when I tried to wash them, either at the end of the first year or the beginning of the next.

I also set out two of those little "flower balls" for the hummingbirds — little round balls that hold about a quarter cup of nectar with a large, brightly-colored plastic flower that fits down inside the neck. The flower balls fit into a holder that mounts on a steel rod pushed down into the ground. The hummingbirds love the "flowers" that give them another source of food.

Feeding the Hummingbirds

Usually, right around our yard, we have between four and six pair of Ruby Throated Hummingbirds. Later on in the summer, when their offspring start coming for the nectar, we have many more hummingbirds flying around the yard. Pine trees on the east and north sides of the yard provide a perch for the hummingbirds while they wait their turn to get at the feeder.

Not that the hummingbirds are especially patient about waiting their turn at the feeder. They chase each other around and chatter and scold. I am scolded, too, when I have the audacity to remove the feeder from its hook in front of the kitchen window so that I can wash it out and fill it with fresh nectar. On more than one occasion, I have ducked to avoid a collision with a hummingbird.

I have learned not to wear a red shirt when taking down the hummingbird feeder during the day. A red shirt causes the hummingbirds to flit back and forth in front of my face, as if searching for the perfect access to this huge, glorious RED flower they see before them.

Instead of filling the hummingbird feeders during the day and risking a collision with the tiny birds, I often wait until after dark to take down the feeder, wash it and fill it with fresh nectar. That way, when the hummingbirds are looking for food early in the morning, they will find a clean feeder filled with fresh nectar.

As the season progresses, the hummingbirds dramatically increase their nectar consumption so that by July, I am filling the hummingbird feeder at least once per day. I like having the hummingbird feeder in front of my kitchen window where I can closely observe the hummingbirds as they perch on the feeder and dip their beaks into the nectar. When the light is just right, I can see their impossibly long tongues darting out to suck up more of the liquid or to lick off the tiny droplet hanging from the end of their beaks.

When the light is just right, it is also easy to see why they are called "Ruby Throated" hummingbirds. The red feathers at the base of the male's throat glow like the ruby slippers in the Wizard of Oz.

All summer long I watch the hummingbirds, and as September approaches, they became more and more frantic to eat as much as they can, in preparation for the long flight back to South America.

And then, early in September, one day it will dawn on me that I haven't seen as many hummingbirds. As more days pass, the remaining hummingbirds leave too. Eventually I don't see any hummingbirds at all, and I know it will be many months, with a long hard winter in between, before I can once again feed the hummingbirds that hover in front of my kitchen window.

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LeAnn R. Ralph is the author of the books *Christmas in Dairyland (True Stories from a Wisconsin Farm)* and *Preserve Your Family History (A Step-by-Step Guide for Writing Oral Histories)*. She is working on her next book *Give Me a Home Where the Dairy Cows Roam.* You are invited to order a book from Rural Route 2. You are also invited to sign up for LeAnn's FREE! monthly newsletter, Rural Route 2 News. Visit --

Hummingbirds Have Small Brains But Good Memory

By Madeline White

According to recent research, hummingbirds may have very small brains but excellent memory when it involves food. These small birds weigh 0.7 ounces or less and their food consists of nectar and insects.

Research published in the journal *Current Biology* proposes that hummingbirds can remember their food source and actually plan with some precision. Susan Haley from the University of Edinburgh said, "To our knowledge, this is the first demonstration that animals in the wild can remember both the location of food sources and when they visited them,"

Healy, along with scientists in Britain and Canada, have studied the Rufous hummingbird that lives in the Canadian Rockies. The Rufous hummingbird can remember the location of specific flowers and the last time they visited them. These are two examples of episodic memory previously considered exclusive to humans. Healy stated, "Hummingbirds that defend territories of many flowers remember which flowers they have recently emptied."

In the birds' feeding grounds, scientists kept track of how frequently the hummingbirds visited eight artificial flowers filled with a sucrose solution. Once the flowers were empty the scientists refilled half after 10 minutes and other half after 20 minutes.

Scientists discovered that the birds' returned to the flowers according to the refill schedule. The flowers refilled every ten minutes were visited by the hummingbirds sooner than those refilled every 20 minutes. Healy commented, "We were surprised that their timing abilities were so good and that they managed to cope so efficiently with as many as eight different flowers."

The Rufous hummingbird has the longest migration route of all US hummingbirds. In the winter, the Rufous hummingbird migrates 2,000 miles (3,200 kilometers) from Canada to Mexico. In the spring they return home to reproduce.

Scientists believe that the hummingbird's brain has become extremely developed because they travel long distances and don't have time and energy to waste looking for food.

Madeline White specializes in flower delivery online. She is especially focused on Canadian flower delivery.

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