The Hummers are Back

They’re back! Ruby-throated Hummingbirds have made their way back to North Carolina for the long summer months. Late March or early April usually marks the return of these beautiful and mysterious birds, but until yesterday I had not spotted one.

Ruby-throated Hummingbirds are the only known species of hummingbird to habitually migrate and nest east of the Mississippi. They winter in Mexico, Central or South America, or the Caribbean, then fly, sometimes over five hundred miles, across the Gulf of Mexico to the eastern United States.

Ruby-throated Hummingbirds are identified by their bright emerald or golden-green on the back and crown, with gray-white underneath. Males typically have a brilliant iridescent red throat that looks darker when light is not good. Males are smaller in size with a shorter beak. Both genders are slender, have a bill that is curved slightly downward, and fairly short wings that do not reach all the way to the tail when the bird is sitting. Ruby-throated Hummingbirds can fly straight very quickly, stop on a dime, and adjust their position up, down, or even backwards from midair. Their wings beat an average of 55-75 beats a second, and their hearts an average of 1200 beats per minute when they are feeding. Whew, I’m tired just thinking about it!

Hummingbirds are heavy feeders. An average hummingbird consumes half its weight in sugar each day, and feeds five to eight times each hour, up to a minute at each feeding. If you are a bird lover like me, then you probably already have your hummingbird feeder set up for the season. But if not, here are a few tips to follow. First, make sure your feeder is easily accessible to clean and refill, because this will need to be done often. If you are a do-it-yourself person, combine ¼-cup sugar with 1-cup water to make a clear syrup. Table sugar is perfectly fine to use and is much cheaper than buying premixed solutions. It is not recommended that you use honey or red food coloring. Make a large batch and store the excess in the refrigerator. Because of the sugar content, feeders will harbor bacteria and mold. So, make sure to clean your feeder once a week using a toothbrush and a mild detergent.
Red is known to attract hummingbirds, but if you are having problems with other insects visiting your feeder, stay away from the color yellow. Yellow is known to attract insects such as bees and wasps. Bee guards are a feature to look for when purchasing your feeder. Also, some feeders have ant moats built into their design just above the main portion of the feeder. If yours is not one of those, a peanut butter jar lid turned upside-down with a screw or an eyebolt to hang from will work just as well.

While hanging a feeder will definitely get you on your way to viewing the Ruby-throated Hummingbird, flowers will help even more. These beautiful creatures love anything red, but bright pinks, roses, oranges, and purples will also entice them. They seem to prefer the nectar from tubular flowers, such as crossvine, Carolina jessamine, and red buckeye, but also love bee balm, columbine, fushia, foxglove, snapdragon, geranium, sage, verbena, and many more. Plant a perennial garden just for the birds, or create a beautiful patio using potted plants and hanging baskets. Ruby-throated hummingbirds are very curious creatures, and will investigate any source of food even if it is close to a house. Hummingbirds have even been photographed resting on a person’s hand.

So, enjoy the hummingbird season while it lasts. We should continue to see the hummers until about October. So, while they are here, fill your feeders, and get dirty planting your hummingbird gardens!

If you have any questions or comments, please feel free to contact me, Kerrie Roach, horticultural Extension agent, at North Carolina Cooperative Extension, Robeson County Center, at (910) 671-3276 or by E-mail at Kerrie_Roach@ncsu.edu, or visit North Carolina Cooperative Extension, Robeson County Center’s website at Robeson.ces.ncsu.edu.