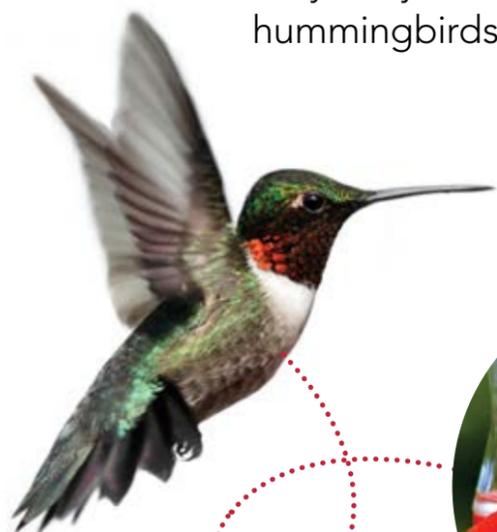


tiny treasures

THE RUBY-THROATED HUMMINGBIRD

STORY **MELANIE REKOLA**

I am an avid and all-inclusive bird-lover, and as promised in a previous fowl-related story, it's now time I tell the tale of the glorious pint-sized jewels of the summer sky – the hummingbird. Why not join in all the fun and ready your garden for the hummingbirds this year?



MELANIE'S TOP HUMMINGBIRD PLANT PICKS

- ✓ Scarlet Runner Bean
- ✓ Trumpet Vine
- ✓ Hosta
- ✓ Delphinium
- ✓ Buddleia
- ✓ Crocosmia
- ✓ Red Columbine
- ✓ Beebalm
- ✓ Cardinal Flower
- ✓ Foxglove
- ✓ Red Coral Bells
- ✓ Canna
- ✓ Weigela
- ✓ Honeysuckle
- ✓ Fuchsia

These beloved little creatures are an amazing feat of nature. The tiny seven-to-nine centimeter birds have a heart rate that reaches 1,260 beats per minute and can hover in mid-air as their wings furiously beat 50 times per second! To keep up with this pace, they need to consume their weight in nectar each day and are continually just hours away from starvation at any given time. Although hummingbirds are well known to feed on nectar, they also eat many small insects. This fact makes garden chemical and pesticide use strictly prohibited for a safe hummingbird environment as these can kill both adults and young alike.

Putting up a feeder is a surefire way to entice hummingbirds to your garden, and the best feeders are made from glass or acrylic. It is essential to clean your feeders twice per week to avoid nectar spoilage and accidental fowl fatality. Place the feeder away from windows, ideally near tall plant cover such as a tree or hedge. Home-made food mix is a one-quarter sugar-to-water ratio, and it's best to avoid colouring the fluid for the bird's optimal health. Hummingbirds also love spraying water. Unlike most backyard bird bathers, these birds enjoy flying in and out of a spray of water.

It is in the hummer's nature to forage

constantly, and they only use a feeder for about 20 per cent of their daily nectar consumption. By providing spraying water, trees, a feeder plus their favoured, flower-nectar sources in a succession of bloom you will deliver a utopia they may even nest in! But don't be surprised if you don't spot the nesting site. The tiny little cup-shaped nests made with spider silk, thistledown and animal hair often include lichens, which almost completely disguise them. If you happen to see a minute emerald/red bird flying fast in a U-shaped flight pattern, you are witnessing a male's mating dance. After copulation, the petite pair does not raise their young as a couple, leaving the

female to raise their young unaided.

Contrary to popular belief, Hummingbirds do not feed only on red flowers or feeders. They will feed from any that is rich in nectar, but do have a preference for vivid colours.

Ruby-throated Hummingbirds migrate north much earlier and stay far later than one might assume. Ensure your feeders are full and available mid-April until late fall. It is the strongest males that return first to establish the premium territories, which usually include the all-important feeder. They are also the first to leave, often early August, followed by the females. The new fledglings are last to leave and left behind to accumulate fat stores for

their solitary migration south. Hummingbirds will not stay past their usual fall migration time when feeders are left out.

Our miniature feathered friends feed most actively in the morning and evening, making these the optimal times for viewing. At my home, the acrobatic performances of our resident hummingbirds are the after-dinner entertainment as we sit in the garden surrounded by a multitude of miniature speed-demons whizzing by our heads! The impatient and frustrated little birds are extremely territorial, and I've witnessed many a squabble between rival males. They'll even try to chase away other bird species,

bees and butterflies to defend their terrain. If you ever observe several birds at the feeder together without aggression, they are likely related family. Unfortunately, their small stature leaves them prey to a host of common backyard life such as the (gulp) praying mantis and blue jay.

We'd love to hear your garden stories as well! Join the discussion online at ourhomes.ca and find me under the subheading OUTDOOR. In the meantime, I encourage you to live, love and landscape. **OH**

Melanie is a certified horticulturalist and landscape designer.