

HUMMINGBIRDS OF BETHANY BEACH, DE

Annually, two species of hummingbirds visit our community between early Spring through September. They are the ruby-throated hummingbirds (*Archilochus colubris*) and the rufous hummingbirds (*Selasphorus rufus*). The male ruby throated hummingbird has a ruby-red throat, a white collar, an emerald green back and a forked tail, while the female has a green back and tail feathers that are banded white, black and grey-green. The rufous hummingbird has a shiny, metallic, scarlet color chin and throat with dusky colored feet. The female can be differentiated from the male of the species by its metallic bronze-green back and because its pileum is a little duller than that of a male rufous.

Most birding sources indicate that the ruby-throated hummingbird is the predominate hummingbird species native to Delaware. For many years, it was the only species sited in Delaware. Ruby-throated hummingbirds migrate to the eastern United States from a zone that ranges from Mexico to Panama. However, in the past few years, a few birders have reported seeing rufous hummingbirds, a species best known as inhabiting a range from Mexico - traveling through California to Alaska. This article covers both species to keep readers on alert for a rufous hummingbird siting.

One unique characteristic is that these birds can rotate their wings 360 degrees, giving them the control and ability required to fly backwards, sideways, and upside down. Since these hummingbird species are small and fast, it is easy to miss them until one sees them hovering by flowers or a feeder.

These birds are attracted to brightly-colored flowers (especially red flowers) that are tubular. Tubular flowers hold the most nectar, which is vitally important to hummingbirds. A few examples of flowers that are particularly attractive to hummingbirds include perennials such as bee balms, columbines, daylilies, and lupines, butterfly bush, scarlet sage salvia splendens. Biennials such as foxgloves, four o'clocks, and hollyhocks; and many annuals, including cleomes, impatiens, and petunias. Hummingbirds also eat some soft-bodied insects. To help preserve this important source of protein for hummingbirds, spraying chemical herbicides and fertilizers to kill insects should be avoided.

Hummingbirds like to visit flowers and yard feeders filled with sugar water at both dawn and dusk. Experts suggest that feeders be placed 5 feet above the ground in an area without foliage underneath that could harbor predators (cats) or other animals (mice, squirrels) that are attracted to the sugar water. To keep the sugar water fresh, it is important to refresh the fluid every 3-5 days. Because of summer temperatures, placing the feeder in partial shade helps prevent the fluid from becoming too hot and quickly spoiling.

It is reported that hummingbirds have the largest brain relative to body size of any other species of bird. These birds remember specific gardens/yards, and even specific flowers in their summer territory. In other words, they return to sites where they can

expect to find feeders and the most nectar from flowers. Here are a few additional facts about hummingbirds:

- can hear and see better than humans
- can see ultraviolet light (red, green, yellow)
- have almost no sense of smell
- beat their wings an estimated 53 times a second

The ruby-throated hummingbird is 3-3.5 inches long; the rufous is 8cm. or 3.1 inches long. Keep an eye out for these tiny but amazing creatures. Enjoy seeing their aerial acrobatics as they flit from food source to food source.



Ruby-throated hummingbirds (*Archilochus colubris*)



Rufous hummingbirds (*Selasphorus rufus*)