

Ruby-throated Hummingbird  
(*Archilochus colubris*)



The Ruby-throated Hummingbird is the smallest bird in Florida. It is 3 - 4 inches long with a 3 - 4.3 inch wing span and weighs about as much as a penny, 0.1 - 0.2 ounces. Females are slightly larger than males. Males have iridescent emerald green heads and backs, ruby red throats, and whitish undersides. They have two sets of tail feathers, eight outer black feathers that are covered by two green ones when they are folded. Females lack the ruby red throats and have grayish-white underparts. Their outer tail feathers have white tips. Juveniles are similar to females. Both sexes have long thin black bills and black legs that are so tiny that they can barely walk or hop.

There are over 330 species of hummingbirds, all of whom live in the Western Hemisphere. Almost half the species live within ten degrees north or south of the equator. About 25 species visit the United States and 17 regularly breed in the U.S. However, the Ruby-throated Hummingbird is the only one to breed east of the Mississippi. Its breeding range extends from central Canada to the gulf coast, including the northern half of peninsular Florida, and from the Mississippi River to the Atlantic Ocean. Most Ruby-throated Hummingbirds migrate to southern Mexico, the Yucatan Peninsula, and Central America for the winter. However, a few do overwinter in south and southwest Florida. Winter sightings have been reported in Sarasota, Cape Coral, Lakeland, the Babcock /Cecil Webb Wildlife Management Area, and Celery Fields. Black-chinned and Rufous hummingbirds have also occasionally been seen in Florida during winter. Migration is triggered primarily by decreasing daylight hours rather

than decreasing temperatures and food availability. Migration patterns follow two primary routes: following the Texas shoreline around the gulf or crossing over the Gulf of Mexico. More take the trans gulf route than the shoreline route, and more cross over the gulf in spring than in fall. Fall migration is early August through November and spring migration takes place from early March to late May. Males depart first, followed in a week to ten days by females. Ruby-throated Hummingbirds are solitary; they migrate by themselves. They travel by day and fly low so that they can spot food and stop to eat as needed. Before they start their journey over the gulf, they linger to feed, almost doubling their weight in anticipation of the 18 - 24 hour journey over the gulf. In Sarasota and Charlotte counties, we are most likely to see them as they migrate through our area and, in fall, linger to fatten up. The diet of Ruby-throated Hummingbirds consists primarily of nectar and sap but they also eat small insects like gnats, aphids,

flies and tiny spiders to supply protein. Their habitat is woodland edges, fields, and gardens. Hummingbirds do not have a sense of smell but they have wonderful color vision and are attracted to red. Ideal flowers to attract them are red, orange, or pink native tubular flowers. Although they are small, they need to consume a large amount to meet their metabolic requirements. They are nearly in constant motion. Hummingbirds fly forward, backward, and upside down. They can dive and can hover for sustained periods. Their wings beat about 70 times per second in direct flight and more than 200 times per second when diving. This rapid wing movement makes the humming noise for which they have been named. The Ruby-throated Hummingbird has been clocked at nearly 30 mph in direct flight and more than 45 mph during courtship dives. Their heart rate ranges from 225 beats per minute at rest to more than 1,200 while flying. During courtship, the male Ruby-throated Hummingbird puts

on an elaborate aerial display involving flying rapidly by a perched female while buzzing and flashing his red gorget. The male will often fly in a horseshoe pattern and make rapid, deep dives. In Florida, breeding usually takes place between March and July. Ruby-throated Hummingbirds do not form bonded pairs for even a season. Both sexes have multiple partners each season. The female may have one to three broods. She builds a walnut sized, cup-shaped nest out of lichen, dandelion fluff, and plant material that is held together with spider webs and usually lays two pea-sized white eggs within 10 - 14 days after breeding. Incubation takes 12 - 16 days but the mother continues to sit on the nest and sleep in the nest for the first week or two to keep the chicks warm. Once they have grown pin feathers, the chicks can regulate their own temperature and keep each other warm. The babies fledge in less than a month but the mother continues to feed them for another week or two. They reach sexual maturity by the first spring

after hatching. The average life span for Ruby-throated Hummingbird is 3 - 5 years. Eggs and chicks can become victims of bluejays, crows, squirrels, snakes and raccoons. Adults can become prey of cats, hawks, kestrels, shrikes, and kites. Bees and wasps can fatally sting them and preying mantis have been known to grab them while they are at feeders.

To attract Ruby-throated Hummingbirds to your yard, plant a variety of native plants, arranged in several groupings. Concentrate on red, orange, or pink tubular flowers that bloom at different times to provide nectar throughout the breeding season. Some suggestions are Bottlebrush, Butterfly Bush, Coral Bean, Coral Honeysuckle, Coral Porterweed, Firebush, Firespike, Florida Azalea, Milkweed, Pagoda Flower, Rose Mallow, Scarlet Hibiscus, Scarlet Salvia, Shrimp Plant, Soap Aloe, Swamp Mallow, Tropical Sage, Trumpet Vine, and Turk's Cap Mallow. Provide a source of fresh water since they will drink 8 times their weight in

water. Ruby-throated  
Hummingbirds will readily come to  
feeders. You can make your own  
nectar : one part sugar (table  
sugar) to 4 parts tap water.  
(Always use regular table sugar.  
Never use honey or corn syrup.  
Mix until sugar is dissolved - no  
need to boil. Never add food color!  
Clean the feeder twice a week.  
May store in the refrigerator for up  
to a week. Hummingbirds are very  
territorial so hang two feeders at  
least 10 feet apart.