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# Natural History Notes



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## THE HUMMINGBIRD



Hummingbird

People watch with wonder and amazement as this tiny winged creature darts about flying backward, forward and hovering like a helicopter as it goes from flower to flower. These rapidly beating wings give off a buzzing or humming sound, giving the hummingbird its name. Of the many species of hummingbirds, only two species are found east of the Rockies – the ruby-throated and the rufous. The ruby-throated hummingbird is the only species found here in Wisconsin.

This tiny feathered friend is adorned with brilliant and iridescent colors. With glimmering blues and greens on their heads and backs, shading into cream-colored breasts, the males are always more brightly colored. The male also has a red or ruby-colored patch on his throat and a forked tail, both of which are lacking on the female.

These birds are in most cases difficult to observe because of their size and intense activity. The adult ruby-throated hummingbird is usually less than four inches long and may have a wing spread slightly more than four inches and a bill about one-fifth of an inch in length. Hummingbirds have some very interesting behavior patterns. The males are bold and pugnacious. They often select a perch where they can observe a particular area, usually their feeding grounds. They will let females feed, but will quickly attack other males. In fact, a male will often chase other birds no matter what their size. They have been known to attack butterflies, squirrels and even dogs without fear. The buzzing and squeaking chirps often ward off the intruder. This tiny creature doesn't even consider its size when it picks an opponent and the hummingbird generally wins.

The male goes into an elaborate courtship display involving diving and flying in a semi-circle with hopes of attracting a female. After mating, the female will lay two white eggs about one-half inch long in the cup-like nest she constructed of down and spiderwebs and camouflaged with lichen and

birch bark. After 14 days of incubation the young hatch and soon will leave the nest. A second brood may then be started. The male plays no part in caring for eggs or young; in fact, no pair bond is formed. They feed on the nectar produced by many species of flowers and pollinate some of these flowers in exchange for the food. You can easily attract these little creatures by setting up a hummingbird feeder which can be purchased in many stores. Much can be learned about these birds by simply observing their antics. Just don't strain your eyes!

The migration of these birds is even more amazing. Their summer range goes north into Canada, while they winter as far south as Central America, 2,000 miles away . . . a remarkable flight, especially in light of their energy requirements. Such tiny active birds burn up energy at a rate about 60 times faster per unit weight than you or I. Because of their small size (one-tenth of an ounce), they have no room for excess energy. Did you ever see a fat hummingbird? Therefore, they must feed several times each hour in order to maintain normal daily activities. But at night their metabolism rate drops greatly and their body temperature also drops as much as 20° F. A sort of hibernation occurs nightly, adapting this creature for survival throughout the night when it cannot feed. The really puzzling question is how this tiny bird survives a 500-mile flight across the Gulf of Mexico twice each year during its migration without food or rest.

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