

Attract Hummingbirds to Your Garden

J. Olson and N. Allen

Among the many birds attracted to gardens, hummingbirds can be the most appealing. Not only are these “garden jewels” fun to watch, hummingbirds play an important role in our environment by pollinating flowers and feeding on insects.

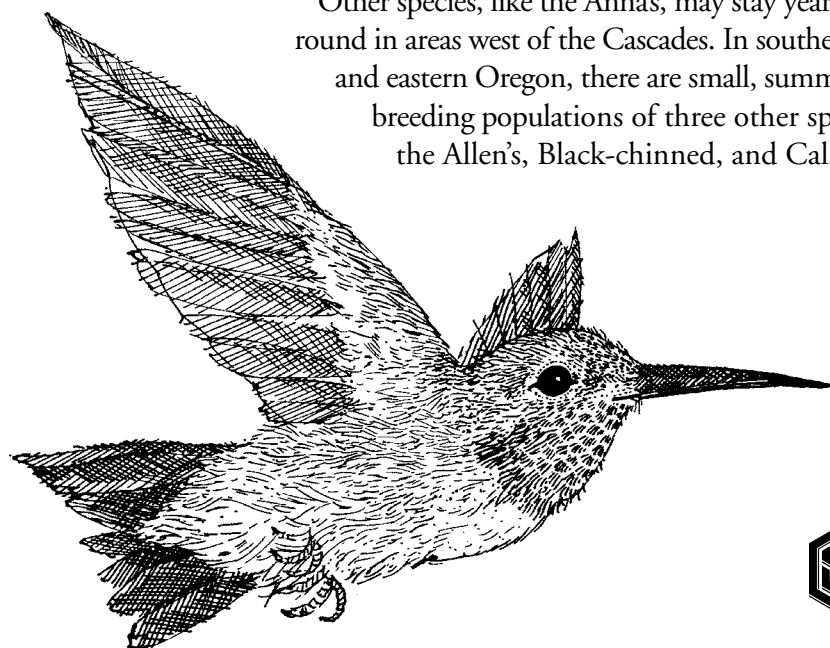
Attracting hummingbirds to your garden is easy. You have a good chance of keeping them there if you meet their basic needs for cover, food, water, and space by planting a hummingbird habitat garden.

Kinds of hummingbirds in Oregon

There are 340 kinds or **species** of hummingbirds throughout the world, but only 5 species are regular visitors or residents in Oregon. These are called the Allen’s, Anna’s, Black-chinned, Calliope, and Rufous hummingbirds. Oregon “hummers” are 3 to 4 inches long, weigh $\frac{1}{10}$ ounce (less than one nickel), and come in a variety of colors.

The Rufous is the most common hummingbird in Oregon. Rufous hummingbirds begin their migration north from Mexico to the Pacific Northwest in January or February. They migrate south in June, July, or August.

Other species, like the Anna’s, may stay year-round in areas west of the Cascades. In southern and eastern Oregon, there are small, summer breeding populations of three other species: the Allen’s, Black-chinned, and Calliope.



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Table 1 describes each species' range and type of habitat.

Natural history

Hummingbirds are unique in many ways. The hummingbird has the largest brain, heart, energy output, and breast muscles in proportion to body size of any bird. They are the only birds that can truly hover and fly backwards. They can do this because their wings rotate at the shoulder. Other birds have limited rotation in the shoulder joint.

Hummingbirds have striking courtship displays. Males usually reach the breeding

areas first to stake out the best territories. Once they establish a territory, nesting and courtship rituals begin.

Some males rise 60 to 90 feet into the air, dive suddenly towards the ground, and then arc upwards again. While diving, the male hummingbird can reach speeds of 60 miles per hour and up to 200 wing beats per second. Sometimes, he makes a whistling noise. The male performs these displays to attract females, ward off other males, and defend nesting and feeding territories.

Hummingbird nests are usually 1½ inches in outer diameter. They are lined with plant down and secured with spider web and insect silk to the tops of horizontal tree limbs,

Table 1. Oregon hummingbird range and habitat types.

Species	Range in Oregon	Habitat
Allen's	Breeding population April–September along the coast and coastal slopes of mountains south of Coos County.	Coastal scrub, riverside thickets in moist canyon bottoms, and brushy edges near meadows of redwood and other coniferous forests. Also breeds in suburban gardens.
Anna's	Year-round resident in western Oregon. Some breeding populations found east of the Cascade mountains.	Chaparral-covered hillsides and canyons, sparse forests with open canopies, and residential and agricultural areas.
Black-chinned	Breeding population May–September in eastern Oregon.	Riverside woodlands, wooded canyons, open ponderosa pine woodlands, and mountain chaparral. Also found in parks and small towns. The nest often is built in a tree over a creek or dry creek bed.
Calliope	Breeding population April–September in southwestern Oregon, except the coast; the east slope of the Cascade mountains, and in northeastern Oregon.	Riverside areas and open forests at the edges of meadows of alder, willow, or aspen thickets.
Rufous	Most common hummer in Oregon. Breeding population April–September throughout western, central, and northeastern Oregon.	Conifer forest, broadleaf and riverside forests, mountain meadows; coast to above timberline.

shrubs, vines, or large fern fronds. Females use a nest year after year, simply adding to the previous year's nest.

The female usually lays two white eggs and incubates them for 14 to 21 days. Once the young hatch, the mother feeds them regurgitated nectar and small insects for about 3 weeks.

Hummingbirds can live up to 5 years in the wild.

Threats to hummingbirds

Weather is the main threat to hummingbirds. They can die of cold weather, long rainy spells, dry weather that causes flowers to wither, and storms during their migration.

Hummingbirds also are prone to disease and exhaustion. They are prey for predator birds, such as American kestrels, sharp-shinned hawks, and crows. Other predators include frogs, snakes, lizards, and bass. Squirrels, rats, mice, jays, and crows eat hummingbird eggs from the nest.

Chemicals from pesticides and fertilizers are a threat. Hummingbirds can be affected if these chemicals pollute their food.

Hummingbirds are not shy. They will feed from plants or feeders placed close to your house or windows. But, they can be injured if they fly into the window glass. To prevent injury, place feeders either very close to windows so the birds become familiar with the glass, or at least 20 feet away to help prevent collisions.

Elements of a hummingbird garden

Hummingbirds are attracted to a variety of species and structures that fulfill their habitat needs. They like trees, bushes, vines,

flowers, hanging and potted plants, hummingbird feeders, and water. They feed on tree sap and the insects that are attracted to it. Tall, medium, and small trees, shrubs, and flowers and grassy areas provide the birds many spots to feed, nest, or perch in the garden.

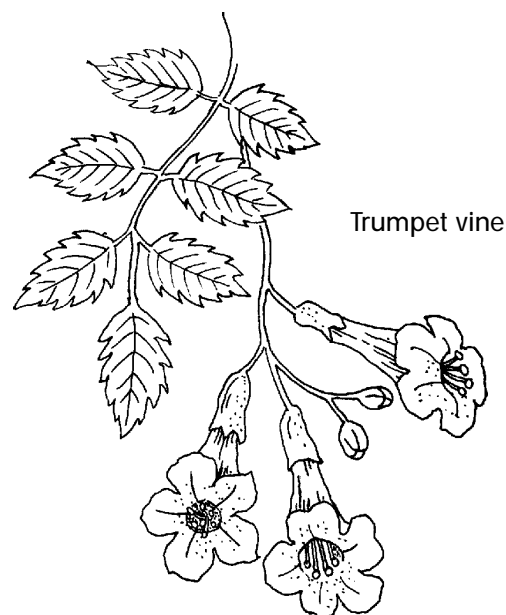
Plants

Hummingbirds are stimulated by color, especially the color red. Clumps of bright red, orange, and pink flowers are more visible to them than other colors. Plants with red, tubular-shaped flowers are an excellent choice for your garden.

If you have electric fences with red insulators, paint them white or black so hummingbirds won't be attracted to them and shock themselves.

A typical hummingbird plant has many flowers with open blossoms. The flowers are on the outside of the plant, so hummingbirds can feed from them without hitting their wings against the foliage. It is important to leave enough space around flowers for hummingbirds to maneuver.

Most hummingbird plants do not have fragrance. Fragrance is not important for



attracting hummingbirds, as it is for butterflies.

Wildflowers that are native to your area are a good choice. They provide the highest quality nectar and are plants the birds recognize. Also, they are better adapted to the local climate, elevation, and soils, so they are more likely to thrive.

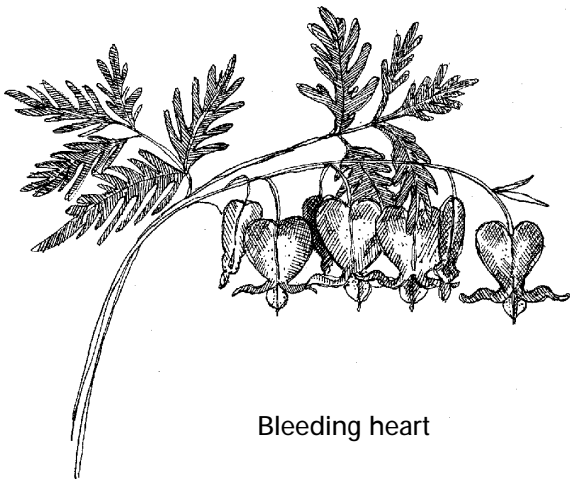
Think of blooming periods when you decide which species to plant. Put in plants that bloom in succession from early spring to late summer to ensure a food source for hummingbirds throughout their stay. This also extends your chance to see them!

Table 2 lists preferred hummingbird plants. The list includes species that are native to the Pacific Northwest. You also can ask about native plants at your local nursery, or contact a Master Gardener through the Oregon State University Extension office in your county.

Water

Hummingbirds need water, too. They use water mostly for bathing. They meet most of their drinking needs from nectar.

You can provide water with a birdbath, sprinkler, or pond. If you buy a birdbath, make sure it has a rough surface for good footing and is no deeper than 1½ inches. If



Bleeding heart

you already have a birdbath, you can put rocks in it to make the water shallower.

Perches

Perching spots are also beneficial. Usually, hummingbirds use broken tree limbs, the insides of bushes, fence posts, and even TV antennas for perches. If you have removed dead tree limbs and wish to supply perches, attach ¼-inch wood dowels to trees or other objects near the birds' territory. Good spots are above the garden or near your bird feeder.

Hummingbird feeders

To attract hummingbirds to your yard, you only might need to put up a hummingbird feeder. These provide a primary food source close by, so the hummingbird saves energy.

Making a nectar solution

Commercial nectar solutions are more expensive than homemade ones. And, they may contain preservatives, dye, food coloring, or flavoring which can harm hummingbirds. You can make a safe, simple nectar solution at home.

Use one part cane sugar to four parts water. **Do not use honey, artificial sweeteners, or food coloring.** Boil the solution for at least 30 seconds to retard fermentation and mold growth. Do not microwave the solution, because the microwaves break down sugar molecules and can change the nutritional value. Let the solution cool before you fill the feeder.

You can store the solution in the refrigerator for up to 2 weeks before it begins to ferment.

(Continued on page 6.)

Table 2. Characteristics of hummingbird plants.

Nectar plants	Plant height	Blooming period	Light needs	Soil needs
<i>Trees</i>				
Dogwood *	20-30'	June	F-sun, P-shade	Moist to dry
Crabapple *	20-30'	June	F-sun, P-shade	Moist
<i>Shrubs and brambles</i>				
Siberian pea-shrub	10-15'	Early May	F-sun, P-shade	Moist to dry
Hardy fuchsia	3-6'	July	F-sun, P-shade	Moist
Wild azalea	3-8'	Late spring	F-sun, P-shade	Moist
Red-flowering currant *	6-10'	March and April	F-sun, P-shade	Moist to dry
Salmonberry *	5-8'	Early spring	F-sun, P-shade	Moist to dry
<i>Garden perennials and wildflowers</i>				
Columbine *	6-24"	Spring to summer	F-sun, P-shade	Moist to dry
Paintbrush *	8-20"	Spring	F-sun, P-shade	Moist to dry
Bleeding heart *	8-18"	April to June	P-shade	Moist
Coral bells *	1-3'	April to August	F-sun, P-shade	Moist to dry
Lavender	8-18"	April to June	P-shade	Moist
Cardinal flower	8-18"	April to June	F-sun, P-shade	Moist to dry
Beebalm	1-3'	April to August	F-sun, P-shade	Moist to dry
Penstemon *	1-3'	April to August	F-sun	Moist to dry
Cape-fuchsia	1-3'	July to September	P-shade	Moist
Scabiosa	2-3'	Summer	F-sun	Moist to dry
Hedge-nettle *	2-3'	Summer	F-sun	Moist
California-fuchsia*	Varies	Late spring	F-sun	Moist to dry
<i>Annual garden flowers</i>				
Clarkia*	6-36"	Summer	F-sun	Dry
Sweet William	6-24"	Summer	F-sun	Moist
Sage	Varies	April to September	F-sun	Dry
<i>Vines</i>				
Trumpet vine	3-4'	Late summer	F-sun	Moist
Scarlet runner bean	30-40'	Spring	F-sun	Moist to dry
Orange honeysuckle *	2-3'	Spring	F-sun, P-shade	Moist to dry

Key*Light needs*

F-sun: Plants grow in full sun during all or most of the day.

P-shade: Plants grow in light shade or afternoon shade.

Soil needs

Moist: Plants grow in soil that contains moisture during the growing season.

Dry: Plants grow in soil that may become dry during the growing season.

* Plant may be native to the Pacific Northwest.

Where to place your feeder

Put your feeder where it will not be in direct sun for extended periods. Sun causes the solution to mold sooner. Also, hot air in the top of the feeder can expand, forcing liquid out.

It's a good idea to place feeders near nectar-producing plants. That way, hummingbirds can get a more complete nutritional balance from a variety of nectars and insects.

Place your feeder where you can clean and fill it easily. Clean and refill it every 4 or 5 days, or when it begins to look cloudy, or if you notice wild yeast forming. Yeast appears as flecks on the surface of the liquid around the edges. You can clean the feeder with a bottle brush, hot water, and a little vinegar.

Hummingbirds can be territorial around feeders. For this reason, most people prefer to have several small feeders rather than one large one.

Feeders also attract insects

Hummingbird feeders can attract ants, bees, and wasps, so you might want to place bee guards over the feeding ports. New feeders usually have them. You also can smear the surface around the feeder openings with petroleum jelly, salad oil, or mineral oil so insects can't get a foothold. Or, move your feeder to a new spot.

Do not use pesticides to kill the insects around feeders. Hummingbirds might ingest chemicals while collecting nectar. Also, the pesticides could kill insects that are food for the hummingbird.

Conclusion

It's fun and easy to attract hummingbirds to your garden. Many of the plants gardeners favor are favored also by hummingbirds. If you know what they need for food, water, cover, and space, you can learn more about hummingbirds, attract more of them to your garden, and keep them there longer. By providing the habitat hummingbirds need, you are helping to ensure their survival. And, you could be rewarded with hours of entertainment watching these "garden jewels."

For more information

OSU Extension publications

See these other publications in The Wildlife Garden set:

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Other publications

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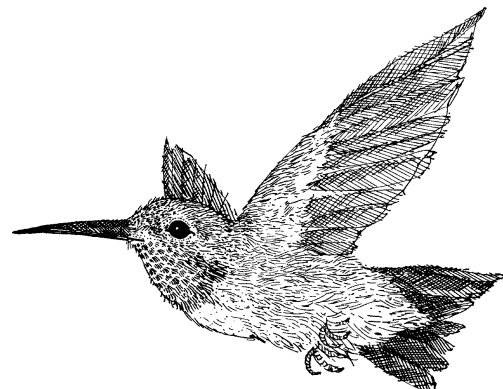
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