

Songbirds — of Missouri —

Ruby-throated hummingbird

Learn More:

Companion activities for this series
can be accessed at
www.mo-nie.com
using code: birdteach



Ruby-throated hummingbirds belong to the family Trochilidae, a group of species known as the hummingbirds. Hummingbirds occur only in the Western Hemisphere and the majority of the 320 species reside in Central and South America. Approximately two dozen species range into the western United States. The ruby-throat is the primary species found east of the Rocky Mountains.

Missouri's smallest bird is also one of its most popular birds, and if you watch one for a short time, it's easy to understand why! Hovering at a feeder then darting away in a dash, the dainty figure of a hummingbird is a fascinating sight to see.

Another reason this little bird is so popular is that it's relatively easy to attract to backyards. Some folks hang hummingbird feeders to complement other bird feeders they've arranged, but others focus solely on feeding hummingbirds because they don't have the room or the money for elaborate bird-feeding set-ups. In addition to the visual fascination this small, flittering bird provides, hummingbirds perform a service for the natural world by pollinating a variety of flowers and plants.

Ruby-throated hummingbirds have emerald green backs, a crimson patch on their throats and a light-colored breast flecked with darker spots. Hummingbirds are known for their hovering ability, a skill that helps them extract the nectar from flowers. Hummingbirds can hover because they move their wings incredibly fast -- up to 75 flaps per second! They are also the only bird that can fly backwards.

Ruby-throated hummingbirds migrate north from their Central American winter homes in the spring and arrive in Missouri in late April or early May. The males precede the females by eight to 10 days, probably to establish nesting territories and identify food sources before females arrive.

Upon arriving at breeding grounds, the females begin building their nests, which are about the size of a walnut. Ruby-throats commonly nest along streams and lake shores, often establishing nests in tree canopies over water. The female lays two white peanut-sized eggs, which hatch in 12-14 days. The young fledge in 18 to 20 days.

Hummingbirds are also easier spotted at this time because there are more of them. The young birds just born in the spring are now feeding with the adults, and the resident hummingbirds are joined by migrants from colder areas to the north.

If you're new to hummingbird feeding and want to buy a feeder, there are a couple of things to remember. When shopping, look for feeders with bee or wasp guards to prevent insects from reaching the sugar-water inside the feeder. Ants can find their way to the sugary solution, too, but putting petroleum jelly on the string (or wire) that holds the feeder can sometimes solve this problem.

To mix the feeder solution, use four parts water to one part sugar. Don't add red food coloring to the solution. Instead, make sure the hummingbird feeder you buy or build is red or includes something red among the materials.

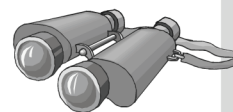
The Missouri Department of Conservation booklet "Ruby-throated hummingbirds in Missouri" has information on hummingbirds and advice on feeding them. It also has information on attracting hummingbirds to your backyard by planting native plants.

(Missouri Show-Me Standards: S.3, S.4, S.8)



Hummingbirds have the unique ability to hover because they flap their wings so fast.

Be a Bird Watcher!



Look...

Ruby-throated hummingbirds can be seen in Missouri from mid-spring until the middle of fall. In winter, they migrate to Central America.

Hummingbirds can be found in a variety of urban and rural settings. In this region, the primary breeding habitat of hummingbirds is thought to be forests and wooded areas that are interspersed with clearings.

...and Listen

Although the most-often heard sound is the hum of their wings, hummingbirds can also produce rapid squeaky squeals and chirps.

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