Hummingbirds In Winter

Gardeners would probably put hummingbirds near the top of the list of wildlife they would like to attract to their backyards. They are fascinating to watch and complement the beauty of the flowers. If you spend any time at all in your yard, you are bound to cross paths with the hummingbird. This tiny little creature amazes even the most ardent bird watcher.

From late spring till early fall we fill our nectar feeders and plant our petunias in the hopes that our little visitors will keep dropping by. When fall comes around, most people take down their feeders and say goodbye till next spring. But did you know you can keep hummingbirds coming back to your yard throughout the winter season as well?

Here in the Pacific Northwest we are frequented by two types of hummingbirds, the Anna's and the Rufous. While the Rufous migrate south (mostly to Mexico), the Anna's tend to make their home here year round. During the summer months, hummingbirds have a huge smorgasbord of plants to choose from. Fresh flowers and blossoms are everywhere. It's a nectar paradise! The hummingbird's diet in winter consists mostly of insects. It is often supplemented by winter blooming plants and nectar feeders set out by the serious hummingbird watcher.

What can you do to keep them coming to your backyard all year round? There are two ways to attract them to your yard. Plant flowers, shrubs and trees that produce nectar over a long period of time, or put out sugar-water feeders.

A single feeder can provide food for dozens of birds. If you decide to use feeders during the winter, please keep them maintained. A hummingbird searches far and wide and selects a feeding territory based on the available nectar supply it finds. If your feeder goes empty or freezes up, there might not be sufficient food elsewhere in their territory for the birds to survive. Responsibility for maintaining winter feeders is the same as in summer, of course, except that you may have to contend with your sugar solution freezing rather than "going bad".

Mix one part sugar and four parts water. Bring to a boil, stirring to dissolve sugar. Allow the solution to cool before filling your feeder. NEVER use honey, which can cause a fatal fungus infection. Red food coloring is not necessary, just make sure there is some red on your feeder. Store any extra nectar in the refrigerator for up to 2 weeks. Make up extra nectar and keep some in the refrigerator so you'll always have some on hand. Have two feeders available so you can easily replace the stale one with a fresh one while the other is being cleaned. Hang your feeder closer to your house. This will make it more convenient to change and could keep it from freezing. In really cold weather hang a light bulb or heating lamp close by to prevent freezing. If your feeder does freeze up, bring it in to thaw as early as possible in the morning. The little birds will be out there trying to feed as the sky gets lighter, long before the sun is actually up.

The plants you will want to have in your yard are any nectar-producing plants. Flowers with tubular red corollas are especially attractive to hummingbirds. The following is a list of mostly native plants that have blooms or berries in the winter months:

- *Aquifoliaceae ilex verticillata* (winterberry holly)
- *Arbutus* (Madrone)
- *Arctostaphylos* (Kinnikinnik)
- *Arctostaphylos* (Manzanita)
- *Calluna Vulgaris* (heather)
- *Camellia*
- *Grevillia* victoriae
- *Jasminum nudiflorum* (Winter jasmine)
- *Lonicera* x *purpusii* 'Winter Beauty' (Japanese honeysuckle)
- *Symphoricarpos* (Snowberry)
- *Viburnum dilatatum* (Asian Beauty)

Photo by WSU Master Gardener Susie Bjordahl

Resources

Tekulsky, Mathew. *The Hummingbird Garden*. Crown Publishers 1990.

Wittler, Jeff. *Attracting Hummingbirds*. 2003

UBC Botanical Garden and Centre for Plant Research retrieved from http://www.ubcbotanicalgarden.org

Anna's Hummingbirds retrieved from http://www.wildbirdshop.com/Birding/Annas_hummers.html