

NATURALISTS' NOTES

Return of the Hummers

The annual hummingbird invasion of Powell River is underway. People who enjoy the antics of these tiny birds, the smallest warm-blooded animals in the world, have already set out their feeders, alerted in advance by Journey North (<http://www.learner.org/jnorth/humm>). This website contains an interactive map that tracks the northward trek of the Rufous hummer (*Selasphorus rufus*), the most common hummingbird in BC.

The Rufous hummingbirds have come a long way to reach Powell River. They winter in Mexico, and their journey is the longest migration route of all North American hummingbirds. It is thought that these birds fuel their migration by following the leaf-out of trees, eating the millions of insects available at that time. When they get here, they're hungry, ready to devour nectar from salmonberries, sap running from drill holes, tiny insects, and sugar water. They burn food so fast they often eat up to 3 times their body weight in food each day.

The "scouts" are the first males that arrive. After the scouts, it's a matter of days to weeks until the others are fighting at the feeder. The primary job of the male hummingbird, when he reaches his destination, is to fatten up. He needs energy to drive other males away so he can establish his territory and perform his courtship flight for arriving females. He streaks skyward, hovers momentarily and, accompanied by a loud wing whistle, plummets down to complete a large circle.

The females fatten up on arrival as well so they can begin nesting. The females are slightly larger than males. They need to be, to produce and incubate the eggs as well as share their food with the nestlings, because the males take no part in raising the young. Two weeks after laying two white, jellybean-sized eggs in a nest the size of a ping-pong ball, the females become very busy when the eggs hatch and the nestlings have to be fed. The chicks need a diet of protein, not sugar, to grow, so mom spends her time catching small insects for them. Three weeks after hatching the chicks are ready to fly.

Adult birds always need nectar, as do the juveniles when they're older. So here's the recipe for artificial nectar, taken from the hummingbirds.net website. Use one part ordinary white sugar to four parts water. Boiling the water isn't necessary, as microorganisms that cause fermentation don't come from the water; they are transported to the feeder on hummingbird bills. Store unused syrup in the refrigerator for up to two weeks. This mixture approximates the average sucrose content (about 21%) of the flowers favoured by North American hummingbirds, without being so sweet it attracts too many insects. Fill the feeder, sit back, and enjoy the sights and sounds of nature.

This article was written by Sharon Thomas for the Malaspina Naturalists Club. Photo by Clyde Burton. For more information on local fauna readers can contact the Malaspina Naturalists at 604 485 6134.