



**Critters in Our Midst:
Ruby-throated Hummingbird** by Carol Ellis

Adult Female Ruby-throated Hummingbird at a feeder. Photo by Ed Cox

"I see said the blind man as he picked up his hammer and saw," is one of my favorite expressions, where "see" refers to sight or understanding, and the moment when I finally recognize what is going on.

It was just a regular trip to the mailbox; on the way I'd glanced at the bed of aloe vera plants with their tall bloom spikes, hoping for a hummingbird to hover on by. Surely one day I'd see a hummingbird as each Fall hummingbirds leave their breeding grounds throughout the Eastern United States, and winter in



Firebush (Hamelia patens): Florida native with orange-red flowers.

the Florida Keys, while others take their fly-way South through Texas to Panama.

Surely they were present in my yard. Yet they eluded my vision until I took the time to sit and wait, camera in hand, for the invisible to appear. To say I'm a multitasker would be accurate, while I sit in wait for the hummingbird, the phone rings and now I'm also talking to a client about art work when suddenly I blurt out "Wait wait I gotta go... It's here..." My reaction to spotting my first hummingbird could have been likened to giving birth to my first child.

But in a flash it was gone again.

I silenced the phone, and waited with my strict attention on the flowers. In about 10 minutes the bird returned. I lifted my camera, pulled off some shots and I captured that amazing bird approaching, hovering, and nectaring on an aloe flower. The

photograph revealed it was a male Ruby-throated Hummingbird (*Archilochus colubris*), its name referring to the ruby-red feathers on the male bird's throat.

Having finally seen a hummingbird in action, I can truly appreciate these amazing little helicopters, as they swoop down from the treetops, hovering in midair while sipping nectar, then zip away all in the blink of an eye. They are so small, about 2-1/2 to 3-1/2 inches, weighing less than a quarter of an ounce; a hummingbird could easily be missed. Perhaps you could hear them coming by the humming sound caused by the rapid beating of their wings... that's why they are called "humming" birds. Ruby-throated hummingbirds' wings beat at an amazing 55 beats per second. They have to keep moving since hummingbirds have tiny feet, which is great for aerodynamics, however there's a downside: these birds

cannot walk. They can only perch or scoot sideways.

Hummingbirds need to feed every 10-15 minutes, which increased my opportunities for getting a photo. They can only feed from dawn to dusk so they must consume more than half their weight in food and 8 times their weight in water. They've adapted to survive darkness when they cannot feed by eating as much as they can just before dark. At night, their heart rate and body temperature drop to conserve energy, sort of like a daily hibernation, otherwise they likely would starve.



Ruby-throated hummingbird male hovers in midair while sipping aloe vera nectar.

Hummingbirds preferred flower color is orange, red or pink. Their needle-like beaks are specialized for feeding on tubular-shaped flowers, where they eat insects found inside, and with their tongue extending beyond their beak, drink the nectar, as if sipping through a straw.

Ruby-throated Hummingbird...

CONTINUED Photos by Carol Ellis except as noted.



Juvenile Male Ruby-throated Hummingbird. Photo by Ed Cox

Frequently mentioned on lists of Keys hummingbird plants are the following:

- Shrimp plant: a native of Mexico and S. America
- Cape/Coral Honeysuckle: having trumpet-shaped orange blossoms
- Firebush (*Hamelia patens*): a Florida native with orange-red flowers
- Firespike: a 4-6 ft. tall shrub with 3-inch-long, tubular red flowers
- Firecracker plant: with red, tubular flowers, growing 3-4 ft. tall and 6 ft. wide
- Hibiscus: whose large singular blooms come in many colors
- Hong Kong Orchid Tree: with purple, rose, and pink-colored blooms
- Geiger Tree (*Cordia sebestena*): a large Florida Keys tree with clusters of bright orange flowers
- Blue Porterweed (*Stachytarpheta jamaicensis*): a salt-tolerant native ground cover

The aloe plant is rarely mentioned as a nectar plant for hummingbirds, although the aloe bloom is pinkish-yellow with a tubular shape.



Geiger Tree (*Cordia sebestena*): a large Florida Keys native with bright orange flowers.



Firecracker plant: with red, tubular flowers, growing 3-4 ft. tall and 6 ft. wide.



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Currently a Master Gardener volunteer, Carol has a degree in Journalism from the University of Florida and is the resident photographer /artist at Ocean Reef Club.

Hummingbirds learn by trial and error which flowers give the best results, so the aloe in my yard evidently has passed the taste test. They also like the red Bombax blooms which appear in late Winter/Spring.

A short while later I resumed the phone call that was interrupted by the bird. Luckily I was speaking with a fellow nature photographer who understood my enthusiasm, and then shared some of his great photos of hummingbirds.

I noticed that some photos involved feeders, which are

great for viewing hummingbirds. A feeder is filled with a mixture of one part white sugar to four parts water. Boil the sugar solution till the sugar is dissolved, then cool. Since the feeder itself is red, there is no need to add red food coloring. Be careful to avoid placing the feeder in direct sunlight, as this stimulates bacteria growth. Clean the feeder every five days.

Though feeders satisfy the sweet tooth, gardening for wildlife is always a better nutritional option, especially if you have a variety of plants which are in bloom at different times.



Photo by Ed Cox