

ON THE WILD SIDE

Hummingbirds and honeysuckle: a perfect match

Kathleen Ebert-Zawasky

People who come to visit us these days are totally distracted when they notice hummingbirds outside our windows, visiting the honeysuckle on the arbor and the two hummingbird feeders we set up. All day long we have the pleasure of their acrobatics and brilliant colors to enjoy. We wait until our visitors have a chance to enjoy them before we go on to other things. We cannot compete with the hummingbird show!

I remember as a young child looking down into a bush in our neighbor's yard and seeing the tiny nests and tiny eggs. Our yard was about six feet higher on the hill than my neighbor's yard so I had a great vantage point. I have been taking special joy from watching hummingbirds ever since.

My mother cultivated honeysuckle so it grew on the outside of our screened-in porch. That gave me another perfect place to watch them. Now I have the descendent of that honeysuckle in my yard, thanks to my Mom, and we have been enjoying them here in Norton for many years.



A female Ruby-throated hummingbird is approaching a native trumpet honeysuckle.

The vine, I have learned, is Coral Red Honeysuckle (*Lonicera sempervirens*) and it now graces my backyard arbor as it did my mom's garden. Some people call it trumpet honeysuckle. It is native to New England and does what it promises to do: each spring the hummingbirds appear and enjoy its nectar. The long coral tubular flowers seem to fit the long thin hummingbird beak like a finger in a glove.

The hummingbirds are Ruby-throated Hummingbirds (*Archilochis colubris*) which is the only species of hummingbird that breeds in eastern North America. They get their name from the patch of iridescent feathers on the neck of the males. These feathers can look very dark or black in the shade but flashes a brilliant ruby color when he comes out into sunlight. The females do not have a ruby throat but they have the same beautiful emerald green plumage on their backs as the males. They are light gray or white below and have tiny feet not suited for walking or hopping.

They migrate to Central America in the fall and some go all the way across the Gulf of Mexico in one long marathon flight. They return in the spring, males first, followed by the females a week or two later. The males find a territory and await the arrival of the females

to start the new breeding season. They eat insects and spiders and when flowers are plentiful, they drink nectar to help fuel their rapid metabolism. While enjoying nectar, they pick up pollen and help to pollinate the plants they visit. Hummingbird feeders that offer sugar water simulates the nectar they naturally collect and make it a lot easier to observe these extremely energetic little birds.

The females make their tiny nests out of plant fibers, moss and lichen with a soft lining of plant down and spider silk. The silk is woven around fibers to give the nest strength and flexibility. The lichen and moss on the exterior make it look like the branch or bark of the tree it is in. It is about the size of half a walnut and generally holds two eggs per brood. The spider silk (collected from spider webs) gives the nest some elasticity so it can stretch a little as the chicks grow. The female builds the nest herself and keeps it in good repair.

If you want to learn a lot more about hummingbirds, you must see *Hummingbirds: Magic in the Air*, perhaps the best nature video I have ever seen. You can see it at: <http://video.pbs.org/video/1380512531/> This award winning video by Ann Prum was originally broadcast on PBS about a year ago and I am delighted they make it available to us free online.

Getting back to the honeysuckle, for a minute, I just want to mention that this wonderful native variety has a very serious competitor. The Japanese variety was brought to the US about a hundred and fifty years ago and has spread aggressively. It is considered an invasive species now because it grows so rapidly and takes the place of native honeysuckle and many other plants. Its pleasant fragrance and white flowers make it attractive to people, but it really should not be allowed to invade our yards and gardens. In fact, it should be dug up and discarded to allow our native varieties to survive.

Providing nectar for hummingbirds and planting native plants is an easy and enjoyable way to support wildlife in your own yard or garden and get you on your way to certifying your yard as a Certified Wildlife Habitat. For complete information, go to the National Wildlife Federation website: www.nwf.org/In-Your-Backyard.aspx or see the Land Preservation Society (LPS) of Norton website: www.nortonlandpreservation.org

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