

# Green Scene: Hummers are Here

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[photograph]

[caption: A female rufous hummingbird, about 10 centimetres from tip to tail, rests momentarily on a backyard feeder.

Kiyoshi Takahashi photo]

[Title in Tri-City News: Humming or buzzing, the birds are back]

Perhaps, your favorite signs of spring are yellow forsythia blossoms or the pink flowers of cherry trees. I have a friend who tracks spring's arrival by the appearance of rufous hummingbirds in her yard. This year, she recorded her first on March 28, much later than records of recent years and due, possibly, to recent cold weather. Rufous hummingbirds, the most common local species, undertake the longest migrations of all hummingbirds. Each spring, they migrate from western Mexico as far as 6000 kilometers north to Alaska, an amazing distance for a bird that weighs only 3-4 grams.

There are over 300 species of hummingbirds, called "hummers" by the birding folk, and are found only in the western hemisphere. Most parts of South and Central America host a spectacular variety of hummingbirds although it is the northern Andes in South America which feature the highest diversity. A hummer's wings beat 20-80 times per second in a figure-eight pattern that allows them to hover over flowers. Their name comes from the humming noise made by their wings. However, the sound from the wings of rufous hummers is more accurately described as a buzz.

The main food for all hummingbirds is nectar. They supplement this diet with protein-rich pollen plus small insects and spiders. Hummingbirds provide essential pollination services for many species of plants in exchange for the gift of nectar. Hummers have specialized needle-like bills through which they extend long tongues to extract nectar from flowers while hovering. Many plants have evolved flower shapes specifically designed to fit a hummingbird's bill. Recent studies demonstrated that hummingbirds have an impressive ability to remember the locations of flowers and how frequently each one must be visited on daily rounds to maximize the amount of nectar that can be harvested.

In British Columbia, hummingbirds time their northern migrations to coincide with the blooming of salmonberry bushes and red-flowering currants. The hummers arriving now are all males who have arrived early to establish good breeding and feeding territories that they will aggressively defend. Rufous males have a bright red iridescent throat patch that almost glows when it catches the sun. An excellent place to view hummingbirds is the Shoreline Park in Port Moody, Colony Farm Regional Park or other sunny areas rich in salmonberry thickets.

Females will not arrive for several weeks. Their encounters with the male birds will be fleet. Once they mate, females seek sites with excellent nesting habitat and food resources. Females are committed to a single-parent style of life. Typically, they raise two young in a tiny cup nest made out of plant material

held together by spider silk. The males will return south quite early in the summer while the females usually leave by mid August.

During their long migrations, hummingbirds must rely on finding patches of flowering food resources along their travel corridors. Scientists calculate that a rufous hummingbird requires 2.5 g of fat to sustain them for a flight of up to a thousand kilometers. Once a hummingbird arrives, exhausted, at its destination, it can take up to two weeks of feeding to replace the fat consumed by migration. When weather turns cold, hummingbirds are able to drop their body temperature from their normal temperature of over 100 degrees to down to 55 degrees to reach a state of torpor which helps them to conserve precious energy. They use the same mechanism to survive cold spring nights.

If you want to enjoy hummingbirds in your yard, now is the time to put out a feeder for them. This feeder should be filled with a solution of four parts water to one part sugar. Although hummingbirds are attracted to the colour red, the sugar solution does not need to be coloured. Hummingbird feeders should be cleaned on a regular basis to discourage bacterial growth. Many varieties of flowers will also attract hummers and provide them with a more natural food source.