



Hummingbird Fun Facts #3

By Kay Lookingbill

Gulf Coast Bird Observatory Note: We asked expert bird bander, Kay Lookingbill, if we could compile some of her wonderful fun hummer facts from her Facebook posts and pass them on to all of you, and she happily agreed! So here is article number 3 of hummingbird fun facts... in no particular order. Thank you, Kay! -Martin Hagne, Executive Director, GCBO

Digestive System

Hummingbirds consume their body weight (or more) in nectar every day, and that nectar is 75 - 80% water. Do the math! Hummingbirds are one of the few wild birds that consume large quantities of excess water in their daily diet that they must get rid of. Most birds have very little excess water in their diet, and what little does exist is expelled in their poop. Hummingbirds have a highly efficient digestive system. Their specialized kidneys extract and retain

all of the sugar content from nectar, and the excess water is expelled as urine. Hummingbirds are one of the few bird species that actually pee! They do this quickly, too. In as little as 20 minutes after feeding from a feeder or flowers, they'll be peeing. We can always tell when someone in the neighborhood is using red nectar in their feeders, because they pee pink! Please do NOT use food coloring in your hummer food mix or purchase premade red nectar!

How Many Species?

There are about 340 different species of hummingbirds in the world, and they ALL live in the Western Hemisphere (The Americas). The actual number of species sometimes changes because authorities keep lumping and splitting species as they learn more about them. They inhabit all types of habitats - mangrove swamps, rainforests, cloud forests, prairies, deserts, etc. - from sea level to the highest elevations in the Andes Mountains. Many have elaborate tail feathers, crests, bills, or plumage that is simply spectacular.

No hummingbirds are native to Europe, Africa, Asia, Australia or Antarctica. There are 17 hummingbird species confirmed to breed in the US and Canada. Ruby-throated hummingbirds breed east of the Rocky Mountains. The other 16 species breed from the Rocky Mountains westward to the Pacific Ocean, and from the Mexican border to Alaska. An additional 15 species of hummers have been recorded north of Mexico, but don't breed up here.

Yes, they can open their bill!

The hummingbird diet consists of nectar and insects. They need insects for the protein, vitamins, minerals, and other nutrients not found in nectar. Nectar provides energy, but is just sugar water. They catch insects in flight by opening their bill like this (see photo). I've watched hummers amidst a swarm of gnats, snatching them in mid-air. They also glean insects from foliage and tree bark, and even steal insects from spider webs. Hummingbirds will hit your feeders first thing in the morning for energy, then

spend most of the day in search of insects (especially on sunny days). Then hit your feeders again in the late afternoon to tank up for the night.

Photo caption: A female Ruby-throated Hummingbird with her bill open. Photo by Kay Lookingbill