

Ruby-throated Hummingbirds

By Susan Heath and Celeste Silling

Ruby-throated Hummingbird migration is well underway and we've been seeing them regularly at the Gulf Coast Bird Observatory. It's time to get those feeders out! These birds are not only beautiful to look at, they also have some of the most unique physical and behavioral features in the bird kingdom.

For starters, Ruby-throated Hummingbirds are actually quite smart. They have a fantastic memory, remembering where each flower is and how to get there. A hummingbird's brain is about 4.2% of their body weight, giving these birds the largest brain-to-body proportion of any bird.

A hummingbird's heart is huge too when compared to the rest of their body. It can make up 2.5% of the total body weight. In comparison, the human heart is less than 1% of our total body weight. That ratio gives hummingbirds the largest heart in the animal kingdom (in proportion to body weight). Their hearts beat at about 1,260 beats per minute when the bird is in flight. That's the fastest heart in the bird kingdom!

Hummingbirds are also very talented fliers. They can fly forward, backward, upside-down and hover. Some hummingbirds can flap their wings 200 times per second, giving them the record for most wing beats per minute of any bird. Meanwhile, their legs are less impressive. Hummingbird legs are so small that they just shuffle at best. They use their feet for perching, preening their feathers, and sometimes shaping their nests.

Hummingbirds are not only famous for their size, but also for their long beak. They use this long beak to reach inside long tubular flowers and drink up the nectar inside. We used to think that the beak was used as a sort of straw to slurp up the liquid. In fact, hummingbirds actually use their very long tongues to lap up the nectar. The tongue can't pick up a lot of liquid per lick, but hummingbirds make up for this by lapping at a pace of about 13 licks per second.

The Ruby-throated Hummingbird is also well known for their impressive migration. They begin their southward migration in August and continue through October with mid-September as the peak of their journey. Because they breed as far north as central Canada and the majority of them spend the winter in Mexico and Central America, they have to fly as much as 1,000 miles twice a year between their wintering and breeding grounds.

Fortunately for us, the Texas Coast is right in the middle of their migration flight path. Some will follow the coast around, but others will take the shorter route straight across the Gulf of Mexico. To meet the energy demands of this flight, they can double their body weight with fat in a matter of days by bulking up on nectar from flowers and feeders and from eating insects.

If you are interested in enjoying the hummingbird migration and seeing these birds up close, come join us at our Xtreme Hummingbird Xtravaganza on September 18th and 25th at Gulf Coast Bird Observatory headquarters in Lake Jackson! You can watch hummingbird banding and even symbolically adopt a Ruby-throated Hummingbird of your own! There will also be activities for

the kids, nature booths with live animals, a plant sale, and much more to enjoy! We hope to see you there!