

Hummingbird Fun Facts

By Kay Lookingbill

Kay Lookingbill is a volunteer bird bander at Gulf Coast Bird Observatory. During our Xtreme Hummingbird Xtravaganza on September 18 and 25, she will be banding hundreds of hummingbirds while educating the public about them. These are some of her best "fun facts" about hummingbirds.

The largest and smallest hummingbird:

The smallest hummingbird is the Bee Hummingbird, found only in Cuba. Not only is it the smallest bird in the world, it's the smallest warm-blooded vertebrate in the world. A Bee hummingbird weighs 1.8 grams (less than a dime), and is only 2.2" long (slightly longer than a AA battery).

The largest hummingbird in the world is the Giant Hummingbird, found in the Andes Mountains. A Giant Hummingbird weighs 18 - 24 grams (the same as a AA battery), and is 9" long (roughly the same as a Gray Catbird).

How long do hummingbirds live?

The oldest known wild hummingbird was a Broad-tailed hummingbird in Colorado, who lived 12 years, and 2 months. The oldest known Black-chinned hummingbird was 11 years, 2 months in Texas, and the oldest Ruby-throat was 9 years, 2 months in West Virginia. Coincidentally, all 3 of these birds were females. Of course, it is likely that there are individuals out there that we don't know about, that have surpassed these records. Most hummingbirds do not live as long as the ones listed above. Just like any wild animal, their first year is tough. But if they survive their first year, many hummingbirds live to 5 years or more.

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. No hummingbirds are native to Europe, Africa, Asia, Australia or Antarctica. There are 17 hummingbird species confirmed to breed in the US and Canada.

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. 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.

Does their nectar need red color?

Red food coloring is completely unnecessary since the red color on the feeder is enough to attract the hummingbirds. At best it is a waste of money since it passes right through them. At worst, it could be harmful to the bird. The toxicity to hummingbirds is unknown, since no testing has been done, but we know it's not good for people. You can make your own nectar using one part granulated white table

sugar to four parts water. Do not substitute any other type of sugar or sweet liquid. And do not buy pre-made nectar in the store! These contain preservatives and additives and who know how harmful those could be to the birds.

If you'd like to learn more about hummingbirds, stop by Xtreme Hummingbird Xtravaganza on September 18 and 25 at Gulf Coast Bird Observatory!