

Hummingbird Imposters By Susan Heath

This time of year, we see a lot of hummingbirds migrating through Texas but beware of the hummingbird imposters! Yes, that's right, imposters. Hummingbird moths, as their name implies, look and act very much like hummingbirds but they are indeed moths. You may have seen one of these small wonders feeding on your flowers just like hummingbirds do. They are smaller than hummingbirds though, and they have antenna. Have you ever seen a hummingbird with antenna? Nope! They also have a soft and curled proboscis for feeding on nectar unlike the stiff pointed beak of a hummingbird.

In the U.S., hummingbird moths fall into three basic categories: Hummingbird hawk moths, Clearwing Hummingbird Moths and the White-lined Sphinx. The Clearwing Hummingbird Moths are the most common and I've seen them several times in my yard in Lake Jackson. Online references say that the White-lined Sphinx hails from California but I've seen them at Franklin Mountains State Park in El Paso so clearly they get around.

Like actual hummingbirds, hummingbird moths are migratory and move to warmer climates during the temperate winter. The Clearwing hummingbird moths can survive colder temperatures than the hawk moths, though and so are found farther north. Hummingbird moths range throughout the U.S. and are also found in Europe, Africa and Asia.

Hummingbird moths produce two brood of approximately 200 eggs each year. Each species has a preferred host plant but they all follow the same general pattern. The eggs take six to eight days to hatch and the caterpillars are yellow and turn green as they age. They develop a distinct horn at the rear end and thus are known as hornworms. They feed on leaves for several weeks and can be quite a nuisance in your garden.

After two to three weeks they enclose themselves in a brown cocoon under leaf litter or at the base of the plant until the adult moth emerges. Unlike hummingbirds, which can live for five to ten years, the hummingbird moth lifespan ranges from a few weeks to up to seven months.

Unlike other moths which feed at night, hummingbird moths feed during the day, just like hummingbirds. Their similarity to hummingbirds is known as convergent evolution where several different animals evolve similarly to utilize the same resource. Because they feed on nectar, they provide the same pollinating service that hummingbirds do by moving pollen from one flower to another. Unlike hummingbirds though, hummingbird moths were featured in the 1991 film "The Silence of the Lambs". The species used, the death's head hawk moth is not found in the U.S. so rest easy.

The next time you see a hummingbird in your garden, look closely! It might be a moth in disguise!

Photo by Chris F.

Caption: A Clearwing Hummingbird Moth feeds on nectar from flowers.