

Hum-Dingers

by Ursula Nanna, Bell County Master Gardener

When early Spanish explorers in South America encountered hummingbirds, they called them Joyas voladoras, or flying jewels.

Hummingbirds can fly right, left, up, down forward, backward, and even upside down. Their average flight speed is 20-30 mph, but they have been clocked in dive speeds of up to 60 mph. Hummers flap their wings about 50 times per second.

There are about 319 species contained in the Trochilidae or hummingbird family. Here in Central Texas we usually see only 1 or 2 species. They are the Ruby throats and the Rufus.

Only a few hummers grow to more than 6". Because these birds have a very fast heartbeat - about 1,260 beats/minute in flight and 50 beats/minute at rest, they must feed every 10 minutes or so all day long and usually consume two thirds of their body weight in a single day. Their main diet is sugar, usually from flower nectar and tree sap. However, they also need protein to feed their muscles and they get that from pollen and insects.

The tongue of a hummer is quite unique. It is split and has grooves on the sides to catch insects in the air and from leaves and spider webs. When elongated, the tongue is folded into a tube for probing the center of tubular flower for nectar. They take up the nectar at the rate of 13 licks per second. Having a good memory, hummers remember food sources, even from previous years. Because of their feeding habits, hummers are excellent pollinators.

Although tremendously agile in flight, hummingbirds have weak feet and stiff knees. The feet are almost useless except for perching and hummers don't walk. In order to turn around on a branch, they must fly, even if they want to move only a few inches. Being so lightweight, hummers build up momentum and can fly rapidly and then hover instantly.

Dive displays are usually for courting and protecting their territory, as hummers are exceedingly territorial. The male hummer's dives and displays are done with buzzing, whistling, and/or popping sounds made with the wing feathers and the vocal cords. The females usually perch and display their tail feathers to display the white 'warning' underside. After a dive display entices a ready female hummer, the male flies in front of her in short, rapid arcs in a field of about 10" wide.

Hummers establish separate territories with the female building the nest and feeding the young, and the male finding and protecting reliable food sources. Some nests are smooth neat cups on twigs; some are domed; and some are pendant.

Hummers compete for food and nectar sources and fiercely guard their territories by perching high up near flowering plants or feeders. Hummingbirds will attack strangers to the territory and engage in spectacular aerodynamic flights of war and dive-bombing. Despite these displays, instinctively, hummers will not risk damage to their precious bill and will engage less in combat when food is scarce. Hummers are not only quarrelsome among themselves, but are known to attack much larger birds too.

A hummingbird's nest is about 1½" in diameter; so small that a penny will almost fill the inside, their eggs are very tiny with usually 2 to a brood and usually 1 brood a season. Hatching in 2½ weeks, the hatchlings stay in the nest for 3 weeks and are then ready for flight. There is a life expectancy of about 5 years.

It is important when feeding hummers to keep the food changed every 2-3 days in the heat and 3-4 days in cooler temperatures. Use ¼ cup granulated sugar to 1 cup of water. Heat to dissolve the sugar and stir the mix and allow it to cool all the way before adding to a feeder. You can keep the excess mixture in the refrigerator to have a supply on hand in these hot days of August. NEVER use honey or any other additives. Wash the feeders thoroughly with a bottlebrush and don't use bleach.

Hummers will bathe on a cupped moist leaf or a shallow pool. They will also dart several times through the

mist of a sprinkler and stand on a limb in the rain until they are drenched. Having a water source for them will help attract and keep hummers returning. After bathing, hummers will preen and dry.

Hummers are attracted to red or orange colored plants which are tubular, plants like salvia greggii, flame acanthus, cupheas, Turk's cap, canna lilies, or trumpet vine, to name a few. Remember, it is always better to feed naturally with plants and then supplement with homemade nectar if necessary.

Once you attract hummers to your property, take the time to enjoy their flight, feeding, and other daily activities. They certainly are 'Humm-dingers'!

Late August and early September is a good time for preparing beds for fall planting. Because of our steamy weather, organic material is digested quickly by our Southern microbes. That means that you need to work in a few inches of organic material for the benefit of your cool season plants that you will plant in late September and October.

Seeds and transplants that are set out now because they need to mature before the first frost should be shaded from the sun. This can be done with shadecloth suspended over them until the plants are well established.

This is the time to take a close look at your turf grass. If you have some areas that need repair, August is the last month to do it in this year. Our warm season grasses must be well established prior to the first freeze if they are going to make it through dormancy during the winter. Remove any weeds, and then loosen the soil. You can still seed bare spaces in a Bermuda lawn, or place sod or plugs in St. Augustine, Buffalo grass or Zoysia lawns. Newly seeded or sod areas will require careful, daily watering to survive the heat. The rest of the lawn will still need 1-2 inches of water a week. Infrequent (try to go 5-7 days in between watering), deep watering is best for lawns.

For a great fall blooming season from your roses be sure to fertilize early in the month if you did not do so in July. Also critical is that they stay well hydrated throughout the hot months.

For a great show from your spring flowering shrubs, be sure to keep your shrub beds well watered throughout the drought months. Shrubs such as forsythias and camellias are forming the buds for their spring blooms now, water is especially critical for them. Shrubs planted this year need a 3-4 inch layer of mulch at their bases. The mulch conserves moisture and keeps the soil cooler. For established shrubs that have grown out and shade the ground around their roots, the layer of mulch is not as critical.

Finally do not neglect your trees. Trees are the most valuable asset to your landscape and add property value to your home. Do not allow damage from string trimmers or lawn mowers. Newly planted trees should be watered every 5-7 days if it has not rained at least ½ -1 inch during that time period. Run a hose to the tree and end it a few inches from the base. Turn it on at a trickle and leave it on for 30 to 45 minutes to ensure the entire root ball is thoroughly soaked. For mature, well established trees water them when your lawn needs water. Use a lawn sprinkler to apply about an inch of water to the area from the base to the drip line of the canopy. Water slowly and deeply when irrigating your trees.