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Hummingbirds are fun to watch and easy to attract by using artificial feeders or by planting flowers in your landscape. The rubythroat hummingbird is very common to all parts of Alabama and is the most common species of hummingbird seen in Walker County as well. Rubythroat hummingbirds are recognized by their deep red throat patch and dark green back. The female looks like the male except that she has no red on her throat and has a lighter green back.

Occasionally the rufus hummingbird turns up in Alabama. The male rufus hummingbird has a “rufus” or brown color on its back and also has a reddish colored throat patch, but it is more orange than ruby.

During their daily activity, hummingbirds burn up a tremendous number of calories and usually feed about four times per hour. They have tubular tongues that they can extend deep inside flowers to reach nectar. Insects also make up a very small portion of their diets.

Since a hummingbird cannot feed all night, it has to slow its body functions during the night. This state decreased body function is called “torpor”. Now then, if Regis from *Who Wants to be a Millionaire* calls you up asks what torpor is, tell him it’s “a state of slowed body function common in hummingbirds”....FINAL ANSWER! The hummingbird’s body temperature drops, heart rate (normally an overwhelming 200 beats per minute) drops, and breathing slows to about five percent of what would be normal for a sleeping bird the size of a hummingbird. They come out of this torpor state very quickly, unlike people like me who require half the morning and several cups of coffee to wake up.

There are many types of commercial feeders available to help attract them to your lawn. A feeder with a bee guard works best because it keeps bees from using the feeder. If too many bees are attracted to the feeder, hummingbirds will be less likely to use it. Feeders are filled with nectar solution that is either purchased or made at home. For the home made nectar solution, mix 1 part plain white table sugar to 4 or 5 parts warm water. The warm water makes the sugar dissolve faster. Remember your old high school chemistry lesson? Allow the solution to cool before filling the feeder. Hummingbirds are attracted to the color red. If your feeder does not have

red color, try adding a few drops of red food coloring to the nectar solution. Adding food coloring will not hurt the hummingbirds, but it will not be necessary if the feeder is constructed from red materials. I've never seen a hummingbird ignore a fresh container of sugar water or nectar just because you forgot to put a couple drops of red food coloring in the mixture!

Be sure to keep your feeder clean. Rinse out the feeder with vinegar and water at least once a week. Avoid potentially harmful detergents when cleaning your feeder. Never use honey in your feeder to substitute for sugar. Hummingbirds cannot digest honey. They will eat a honey-based solution, but they will soon die from malnutrition.

Many times, when one hummingbird begins to use a feeder, others are attracted as well. Males will set up territories around a feeder and defend it. The aerial combat that follows is very entertaining, but if it gets too intense, try putting up additional feeders on the other side of the yard to limit confrontations. After all boys will be boys.

Planting flowers around your home is also a good way to attract hummingbirds. Red flowers are most effective. Plantings of salvia, petunia, trumpet vine, hummingbird vine, hibiscus, or others will work fine.

Later on this fall, leave your feeders up as long as the hummingbirds want to use them. Hummingbirds are migratory and travel south across the Gulf of Mexico and Central America to overwinter some 2,000 miles from Alabama. Quite a feat for such a small bird! Don't worry about keeping hummingbirds here longer than they need to stay. The migration behavior is a deep-rooted instinct and a simple bird feeder will not keep them here. Hummingbirds know when it is time to leave. Although not commonly seen, there are some species of hummingbirds which do not migrate, and there is a chance one of these birds might visit a feeder during late fall or even early winter. In the late summer or early fall just prior to migration, rubythroat hummingbirds may use feeders in very large numbers and then "disappear" almost overnight on their way to warmer places.