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Why Wildlife Matters: Hummingbirds – Migration Marvels

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Fall 2024 Newsletter

By Stephanie Ellis, Executive Director, Wild Care, Inc.

Who doesn't love a hummingbird? They are fast, and furious and strikingly beautiful. Their delicate nests are constructed of spider webs, mosses and lichens. They are the only birds on the planet that can fly backwards. They seem like a mythical creature, or something in a fairy tale.

Hummingbirds also play extremely important environmental roles...

There are approximately 366 hummingbird species in the world, found from Alaska to Tierra del Fuego, Argentina. Most of the world's hummingbirds are found in Central and South America. Here in the United States, we have 15 species of hummingbirds, and 9 vagrant species that may wander into the U.S.

In Massachusetts, the Ruby-throated Hummingbird is our only breeding hummingbird. They migrate south in the winter to southern Mexico southward across Central America to Panama. Some may spend their winter in the West Indies. These long-distance migrants have a short-season in Massachusetts, typically arriving in late April and heading south for the winter by late September, early October. In some mild-weather locations such as Cape Cod, hummingbirds have been reported through November!

A hummingbirds' high metabolism, tube-like tongues, and long slender bills - enable them to drink nectar from flowers to fuel their metabolism. Across their range, hummingbirds play important roles as primary pollinators and for cross-pollination of plants. Their selectivity of flowers ensures they do not overlap vastly with other pollinator species. Their body mass, beak length and beak curvature correspond with their preferred plants, encouraging the proliferation of varied plant species. If hummingbirds disappeared, plants would decline leading to a less diverse ecosystem. Scientists theorize that certain plants rely on hummingbirds as primary pollinators, especially in areas where flying pollinator insects struggle to thrive due to rainy, lowland conditions. (*ScienceNordic: "Hummingbirds are Ecological Super-Specialists, 2018"*)

Because hummingbirds are so dependent on specific flower species, and migrate to the same locations every year, a disruption in a hummingbird's environment can have immediate repercussions on its population. It's critically important to preserve habitats and plant native species of flowers for these birds.

Hummingbirds also play an important for in pest control. Doug Tallamy, Professor and Chair of Delaware's Dept. of Entomology, stated that hummingbirds need nectar, but 80% of their diet is actually insects and spiders. "If you don't have those insects and spiders in your yard, it doesn't matter how many hummingbird feeders you have, you are not going to be able to support hummingbirds." Hummingbirds have high protein requirements. Having a sugar-water feeder in your yard is helpful to hummingbirds by providing an extra energy source, especially when they are feeding their young. But it is only a small part of their daily consumption and nutritional needs.

HOW CAN YOU HELP RUBY-THROATED HUMMINGBIRDS:

- Plant natives! <https://www.audubon.org/native-plants>
- Don't use pesticides. Utilize natural alternatives.
- Plant native nesting trees: oak, hornbeam, birch, poplar, hackberry and pine
- Put up a hummingbird feeder with sugar water from late April - Sept./mid-October. (1-part white sugar to 4-parts water. Boil. Fill feeder when cooled.) Keeping feeders up through mid-October will help late juveniles and adults arriving through the north, as well as any vagrants that are off course.
- Don't use red dye in your hummingbird feeders. It's bad for their health. Clean feeders regularly, every 2-3 days during hot summer months. Use 1/10 bleach/water solution, or white vinegar (2-parts water/1-part distilled white vinegar).
- Follow hummingbird migration and be fill your feeders for their arrival! <https://www.hummingbirdcentral.com/hummingbird-migration-spring-2024-map.htm>
- Prevent hummingbird window strikes: <https://www.wildcarecapecod.org/save-birds-from-window-strikes/>
- Keep cats indoors. It's safer for your cat, and safer for our wildlife.

These feathered jewels are critically important to our ecosystem.

Let's help protect their journey and support them while they are here - by preserving habitats, planting native flowers and nesting trees, and keeping our feeders filled. Enjoy the beauty they bring to your backyard!

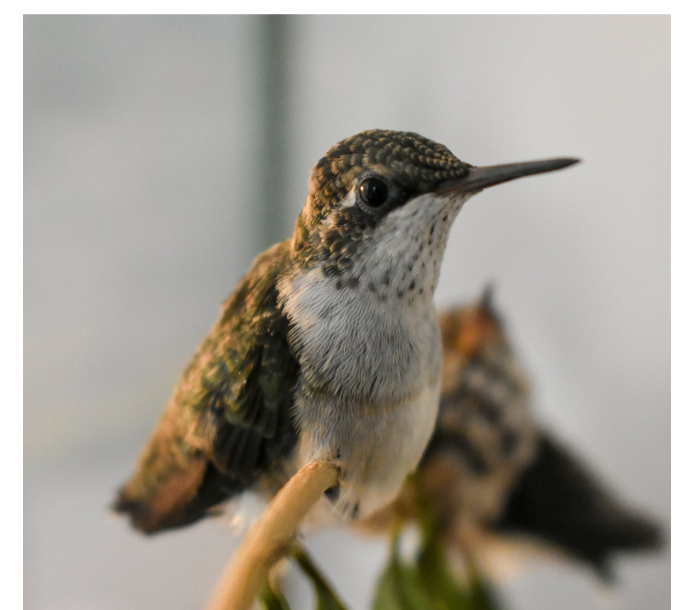


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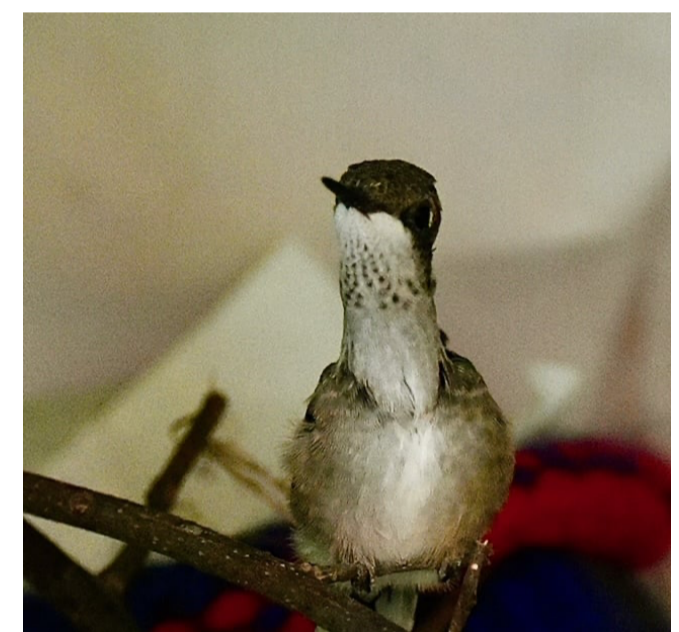


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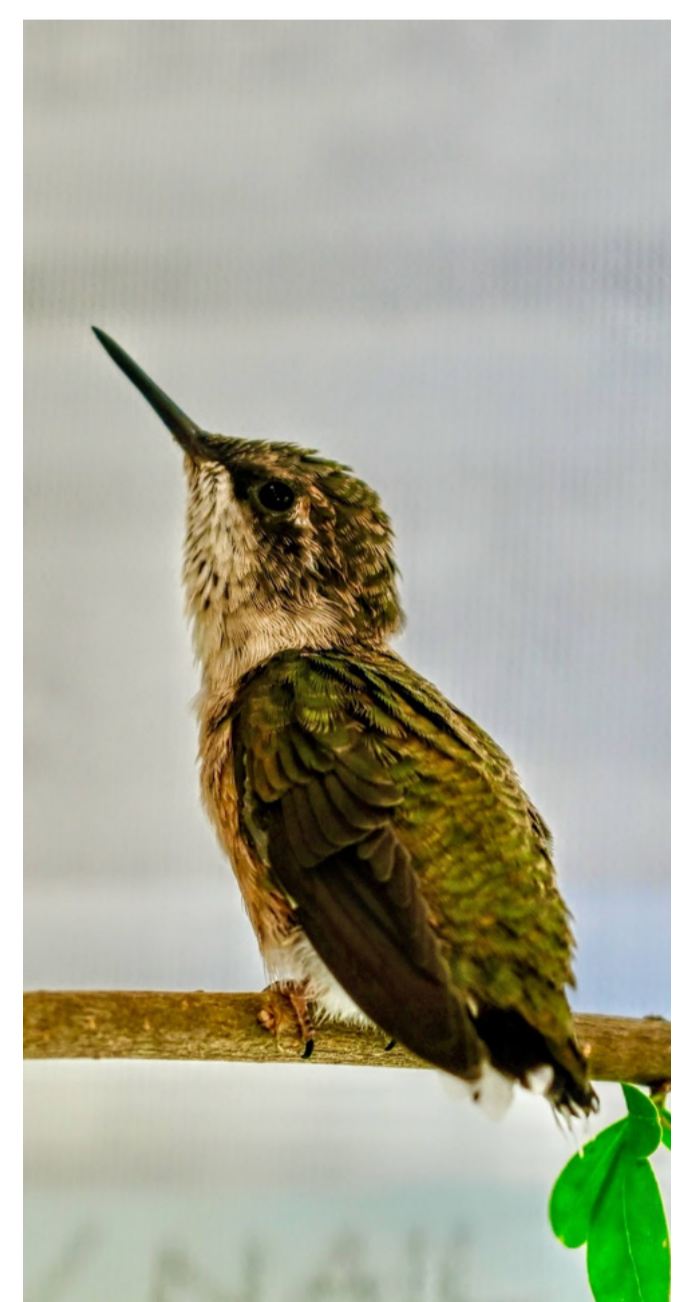


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