

To Attract Hummingbirds, Plant Natives

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Perched in the possumhaw outside my office window as I begin to write this column is the bright-rusty-brown rufous hummingbird that has spent the last four winters at our house. He came in early August last year, and in April he will leave on the long journey to the nesting grounds of rufous hummingbirds in the northwestern US and Canada. This rufous hummingbird is not an unusual winter resident in this area. Many rufous hummingbirds spend eight to nine months of the year in the Texas Hill Country.

Last week “our” rufous hummingbird was joined by a black-chinned hummingbird returning from his winter home in Mexico. The rufous no longer has the sugar-water feeders to himself. Soon there will be more black-chinned hummingbirds, and then ruby-throated hummingbirds buzzing around our feeders. It’ll take extra effort for the rufous to guard “his” feeder.

The black-chinned hummingbirds will stay around to nest in this area, and then they’ll start moving south again in late summer. The ruby-throated hummingbirds may stay several days, but most of them soon will be on their way to nest farther northeast of here. Some of them will return late in the summer to spend several weeks before they fly to wintering grounds in Mexico and Central America. By the time the ruby-throated hummingbirds leave, the rufous hummingbirds will have returned.

Yes, we have hummingbirds at our house all year. They like our

yard. It has what birds need – food, water, and shelter. The food and shelter is provided mostly through a variety of native plants. Mark Klym, Texas Parks & Wildlife Department (TP&WD) and coauthor of “*Hummingbirds of Texas*,” told our Boerne Chapter of NPSOT last week, “If you want to have hummingbirds in your yard, get native plants.”

Nectar-producing plants and sugar-water dispensers only provide an energy source. Hummingbirds also require a source of protein, which they get from feeding on insects and spiders. Native flowers, bushes, and trees are more likely than exotic plants to be infested with the native insects and spiders on which hummingbirds naturally depend.

Good nectar plants usually are those that have trumpet-shaped flowers with deep throats and wide mouths. TP&WD found that hummingbirds are more likely to feed on salvias than any other plant. Maybe that is one reason hummingbirds come to our yard. With salvia species from northeastern Mexico added to our native species, we have salvias blooming nearly all year. Other popular nectar plants native to this area are Turk’s cap, lantana, honeysuckle, flame acanthus, and trumpet creeper. “*Hummingbirds of Texas*” lists many other natives that are good feeding plants for Texas hummingbirds.

Hummingbird feeders can help keep the birds around during those summer doldrums when blooms decrease. But hummingbird feeders can not provide the protein and the

shelter that native bushes and trees do. Sugar-water feeders are only a small part of the story.

A source of protein and shelter are important in providing good habitats for hummingbirds. I assume that most of our bushes and trees have plenty of bugs for the hummingbirds, because we don’t use insecticides around our yard. Also most of our liveoak trees are not trimmed high. Hummingbirds like to nest between 5 and 15 feet off the ground, a zone that has been eliminated by tree trimming in many yards.

Understory plants also provide shelter, but these are eliminated in the typical trimmed-trees-and-lawn yard. During the winter months, the rufous hummingbirds in our yard like to rest in the evergreen Texas madrones, the open foliage of which allows the rufous with a view of the yard and approaching predators, such as our neighbors’ cats.

The native-plant-and-hummingbird relationship is not a one-way street. Some native plants, such as columbine, standing cypress, some species of penstemon, red and white buckeye, and cardinal flowers depend primarily on hummingbirds for pollination. In addition, the hummingbirds do many plants the favor of controlling their indigenous insect population. Many native plants and hummingbirds have a symbiotic relationship that is key to survival of both bird and plant.