



# Backyard Hummingbirds in a Flash

*Male Majestic Hummingbird*

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Hummingbirds are one of the most interesting birds and much is still unknown about their lives, mating habits and migration. Because of their beautiful colors and the fascination one has for these birds they are a favorite with photographers. The fact that they are found only in the Americas, images of these tiny birds can do very well in Exhibitions across the oceans. Hummingbirds migrate many thousands of miles each year from their winter grounds in South America, Mexico and the Southwest US to summer breeding grounds throughout the US and Canada. There are about 17 species that are known to breed in the US and Canada, many more in South America. In the Eastern and Central states and provinces you are most likely to see the Ruby-Throated Hummingbird followed by the Rufous which can be found in every state in some quantity. In the Western US and Canada, you will find the Anna's which is known to winter in California. The West also sees the Rufous, Allen's, Black-chinned, Broad-billed and Broad-tailed. The others are found in smaller numbers and in various areas.

Because of the hummingbird's fast speed, small size and fast movement of the wings, they are almost impossible to photograph in full flight.

Most photographers will photograph them as they come into feeders or as they perch nearby. While some purists like to photograph birds without flash, it is extremely difficult to stop the motion of the wings. Most of the images seen where the bird's wings are frozen or show only very slight movements are taken with off camera strobes or flash units.

When using cameras that have a PC connection or use a hot shoe adapter with a PC connection, you can attach an adapter that gives 3 PC connectors; sync cords can then be connected to 3 separate flashes but all will fire at the same time. Because you want the flash to fire at its fastest speed, put the flash units in manual mode and set the power to the lowest setting, usually 1/8<sup>th</sup> or even 1/16<sup>th</sup> power. This will require the flashes to be close to the birds, sometimes within 2 feet but will allow the flash to fire and recycle at the highest speed. Place one flash to the side of where the bird will be photographed at about a 30 degree angle and at the level where the humming bird will come into the feeder or flower. The second flash will be on the opposite side and a little higher; the third flash will be pointed at the background to give separation between the

bird and the background. Because depth of field will be shallow when using a long lens and high magnification, you will want to use an f/stop between f13 and f16 or greater. You can determine the distance from the flash to the feeder by using a light meter or by a little trial and error. Focus on the feeder and take a picture then change your f-stop to increase or decrease the exposure as needed until you have a good exposure. You will want your camera and flash in manual mode, set your f/stop and use the recommended sync speed for your camera, generally 1/125 is a good speed for almost all cameras. Because you want the smallest aperture size (largest number) possible for the most depth of field, you may have to use an ISO near 400. If you use one flash mounted on the camera or the on-camera flash, you may see the hummingbird's version of red eye, which



Back Yard Set-up



PC Cord Extensions and Adapter



Rufous Showing Tail Feathers

really shows up as a white or silver spot in the eye that doesn't look natural.

Place your feeder for photography in a shady area or photograph on an overcast day. If the feeder is in bright sun, pictures will show a ghosting effect along the wings. This is produced when the ambient sunlight is bright enough to capture the wing movement with the exposure you are using and again when the flash goes off and stops the motion of the wing. If the light on the bird is mostly coming from the flash and the ambient light is less, you will eliminate or reduce this effect. You can use umbrellas or hang a large blanket or sheet to block the sun from shining directly on the bird and background.



Female Broadbill  
at Ocotillo



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those items.

A 400mm zoom lens is ideal for this type of photography as you can zoom in and fill the frame with the bird. You may have to move in closer but a 200mm lens can also work. Hummingbirds will come to a feeder, stick their bill into the feeding port and sip nectar. They then will back out for a few moments and then go back into the feeder. They may do this 4-5 times. When they back out and stop is the time you want to take the image. This will allow you to capture their image without the feeder showing or give enough room to crop it out later in Photoshop. Because most cameras will not focus fast enough as the birds come and go to the feeder, put the camera on manual focus. Have someone hold their hand or other object at the point where the bird will come into the feeder and pre-focus. This will work on most of the birds but at times one may fly in from an odd angle and will not come into the depth of field area. Take a few images, closely check *the focus, and readjust if needed. Use a tripod and a remote cord release to reduce camera shake.* This will make it a little more comfortable while sitting in your lawn chair waiting for the next bird. Some photographers report good luck using auto-focus—give it a try and do what works best with your equipment.

Many photographers use natural backgrounds behind the feeder which may be a green bush or better, some colorful flowers. These will show up blurred and out of focus due to the shallow depth of field. You might go to the garden shop and get some colorful flowers in pots to be placed in the background. Others use artificial backgrounds because they are easier to control and can be moved around. Try taking green poster or matte board and spray paint other shades of green and

maybe pink or lavender to look like flowers in the distance. Be sure to use matte spray paint as glossy colors will shine in the flash. The artificial backgrounds may be used for color competitions but may not be allowed in some nature competitions.

You may have seen images of hummingbirds with their tail feathers spread wide. This generally happens when another bird approaches the feeder and they will show dominance in this way. Some of the strongest images are when the bird performs this behavior and turns toward the camera.

If hummingbirds have been spotted in your area, you can very easily attract them to feeders in your backyard. It's best to set up several feeders in various parts of the yard. While you may buy the multiport feeders that usually have four feeding spouts, it is best to use feeders with a single port spout when photographing. This assures that the bird can only come in from one direction. If you have the 4 port version, you can use black tape to cover up the other spouts while taking images. While some photographers build special contraptions to hold the feeder, you can get Sheppard's hooks of various heights from the garden store that are easy to put into the ground. If the feeder has a perch, remove it; otherwise, the bird will sit and not back out for the best images. Also during photo shoots, take down the other nearby feeders to force the birds to come to the photography location. Go to the local plant store and get a few plants that are known to attract hummingbirds. Place them near the feeders to draw the birds in. You can also use these flowers as backgrounds.

Make your own hummingbird food from sugar



*Male Anna's hummingbird at feeder*

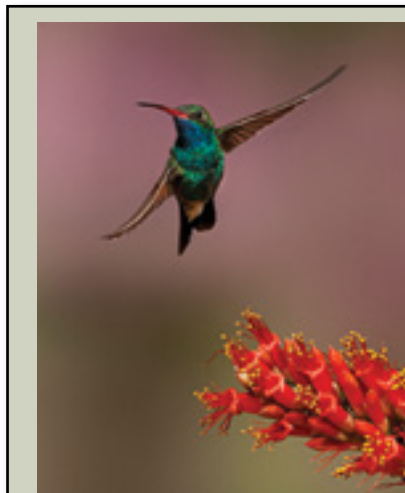
and water, mixing it in a 4 to 1 ratio; four parts water and one part sugar. Some believe the red dye used in commercial hummingbird food may harm the birds. Evidence does not show the red dyed liquid draws more birds than clear sugar water. Heat it up on the stove, bring it to a boil for a moment and you are done. Get some gallon containers to store your food and keep it refrigerated. If all the food is not gone from the feeders within a few days, discard it and put in fresh liquid. Mold can build up in the feeder and spouts. You should clean the feeders with a mix of bleach and water and rinse well before you refill them.

Hummingbirds may not be the only visitors to your feeders. Ants, wasps and bees will also be attracted. Not only will they eat some of the food but the birds don't like these other competitors and will not eat at a feeder full of bees. Ant guards are sold to place between the feeder and where it hangs. It may use some chemical barrier or water that keeps the ants from climbing up the pole and down the wire to the feeder. Bee guards will keep the bees from getting to the nectar but they will still come to get the drops that may leak out during the day. Vegetable oil sprays such as PAM can be sprayed on the spout, the bees don't seem to like it but the hummingbirds don't seem to mind. Because it is a vegetable oil, it won't hurt the birds. This may work for several hours before having to re-spray.

If you want images of birds coming into a flower rather than the feeder, you can take an eyedropper or small syringe and fill flowers

with sugar water. Some flowers that attract hummingbirds are shaped like a trumpet and can be easily filled. You will have to refill the little flowers after each bird feeds. Another trick is to hang or place flowers just in front of the feeder spout to hide it. Even though the bird's beak is behind the flowers, the distance and long lens will compress the view so it will not be noticed.

Take lots of images. Because hummingbirds move so fast, images you think will be good may have wings forward hiding the head, be slightly out of focus or show strange looking poses. In some cases the bird may be gone by the time you can press the shutter release. Just keep shooting and you may get an image where the bird turns and smiles at you. ■



**Larry will be presenting a program at the PSA Albuquerque Conference, *Backyard Hummingbirds in a Flash* where he will share tips and techniques for attracting hummingbirds into the backyard and how to set-up your off camera flashes for perfect pictures.**

*Broadbill Turning*