

## Making Ripples

by Amanda Bancroft

After some really cold days, the spring season seems to have arrived for good. Nesting birds are already incubating their eggs and feeding newborn nestlings, so be sure your bluebird nest boxes are clean, predator-proofed, and resistant to wasps and ants. Soap on the ceiling fights the wasps, and petroleum jelly on the pole repels predatory ants. Research predator guards for a variety of options to foil snakes, raccoons, and more.

But there are smaller birds making their arrival known: Ruby-throated Hummingbirds are back in Northwest Arkansas! They migrate north every spring, and their migration path reached us a couple of weeks ago. Get out those nectar feeders if you haven't already. Hummingbirds don't need red food coloring to be attracted to nectar, and food coloring may be harmful to their health. A red-colored feeder helps, or one with plastic flowers, but you might also plant red flowers in pots or in the yard where your feeder hangs.

Many animals that are well-known for feeding on nectar or sap also feed on insects or have a variable diet determined by their life stage (young require more protein for growth, for instance). Hummingbirds are no exception. They eat insects for protein, and enjoy sap from the Yellow-bellied Sapsucker's holes in trees like the Sugar Maple. There is, however, an exception when it comes to hummingbirds and insects – some insects pose a real threat to hummers, such as the praying mantis, which can snatch a hummingbird right off a nectar feeder where it lies in wait for its prey!

To balance the hummingbird's need for insects and need for safety, create a yard that is insect-friendly but observe feeders carefully for the praying mantis. According to the Audubon Society, there are several preventative measures you can take. "Placing a hummingbird feeder away from shrubbery or trees, where mantids can disguise themselves, is one effective method. Another method is to place a wide bird feeder cover above the humming bird feeder. The cover is intended as a deterrent, though many species of mantids can fly. The easiest method is to gently take a mantis off a feeder with a stick and move it to another location." Don't use pesticides, especially since a bird might ingest poisoned insects later. Provide plenty of habitat, such as a rotting log for insects and larva to use.

Plant nectar flowers if you have the space to do so. Hummingbirds are even more attracted to flowers than feeders, or so the science says. By ensuring that your yard offers blooms throughout the whole season, with some flowers blooming when others are not, hummingbirds will start to find your yard a paradise. Generation after generation of hummers can grow up and migrate to and from your neighborhood!

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