

# A Spark in the Sky



photo by Matthew Gifford

## Mini Fact:

The best place to find hummingbirds in the U.S. is in Arizona.

Hummingbirds were called “glittering fragments of the rainbow” by the famous bird artist John Audubon. They are the only birds with so many super-bright, shiny colors.

## Unusual feathers

Hummingbirds get some of their colors from **pigments**, or chemical colors, just like most birds do. These pigments always show the same color.

For example, a blue jay is always blue, no matter how the light hits its feathers.

But the hummingbird’s brightest colors come from the way its feathers are made. Tiny layers of feather cells break the light into brilliant colors, just as water breaks light into a rainbow.

Unless the light hits the bird just right, you can’t see the bright colors at all. The bird just looks dark.

## A colorful strategy

The ability to display colors when they want is a great help to hummingbirds. A male flashes his bright colors to attract a female or scare off an enemy. Even a hawk can be scared off if it sees a sudden burst of color.

Many females have white tips on their tail feathers. Although most females are not as brightly colored as males, they often flash their white-tipped tail feathers to scare off enemies.



photo by John/Flickr

## Fantastic flyers

Hummingbirds get their name from the hum coming from the superfast beat of their wings. The smallest ones beat their wings the fastest, up to 80 times per second. Even the slower beat of bigger birds, 20 times per second, is so fast that people see only a blur.

A hummingbird’s flight muscles make up about one-third of its weight, a bigger amount than in any other bird. They are the only birds that can fly backward, upside down or sideways for more than a few seconds.

They are so good at flying that most don’t ever walk. They use their feet only to perch. Even when they are just changing position on a branch, they fly.

## Finding food

Hummingbirds are so active that they need to eat at least every 30 minutes when they’re not sleeping. They eat some insects, but their main food is **nectar** from flowers or trees. Water makes up about three-fourths of nectar. **Sucrose**, or ordinary table sugar, makes up the rest.

They need to eat twice their body weight in nectar every day. To get enough nectar, they must feed from hundreds of flowers.

During the night, or when there is not enough food, they can go into a kind of hibernation.



photo by Michael Malz

## American beauties

Hummingbirds are found only on the American continents and Caribbean islands. The areas near the equator have the most **species**, or types.

Colombia has 153 species, the most of any country. Sixteen species nest regularly in the United States.

There are 331 known species. About one-tenth of these are endangered.

## An endangered species

The only place the Juan Fernández Firecrown lives is on Robinson Crusoe Island in Chile. These birds are endangered.

They have lived on this island for hundreds of thousands of years. But when humans discovered the island in the 1500s,



photo by Héctor Gutiérrez Guzmán

**The Juan Fernández Firecrown hummingbird**

rats, rabbits and goats came too. The rabbits and goats destroyed much of the groundcover of the island, part of the hummingbirds’

habitat. Then, about 100 years ago, humans brought in plants that choked out the native plants hummingbirds need.

The Hummingbird Society and other groups are working to save their habitat, cutting down invasive species and replanting native plants.

## Resources



### On the Web:

- hummingbirdsociety.org

### At the library:

- “Hummingbirds” by Quinn M. Arnold
- “Hummingbirds: Facts and Folklore From the Americas” by Jeanette Larson

## Try ‘n’ Find

Words that remind us of hummingbirds are hidden in this puzzle. Some words are hidden backward or diagonally, and some letters are used twice. See if you can find:



ACTIVE, ATTRACT, BRILLIANT, COLORS, ENDANGERED, ENEMY, FEATHERS, FEMALE, FLY, HUMMINGBIRD, INSECTS, LIGHT, MALE, NECTAR, PERCH, PIGMENT, SPECIES, TAIL, WINGS.

S	E	I	C	E	P	S	E	L	A	M	E	F	V	V
T	P	C	N	A	T	T	R	A	C	T	A	A	W	T
B	O	E	S	N	E	C	T	A	R	F	L	Y	A	E
X	M	K	R	H	U	M	I	N	G	B	I	R	D	
Y	S	G	N	I	W	T	N	A	I	L	L	I	R	B
I	N	S	E	C	T	S	T	N	E	M	G	I	P	O
A	B	R	F	E	A	T	H	E	R	S	Q	P	W	S
T	A	C	T	I	V	E	X	B	P	E	R	C	H	R
S	R	O	L	O	C	T	H	G	I	L	E	L	A	M
F	E	N	D	A	N	G	E	R	E	D	K	Q	O	C

## Cook’s Corner

### Pizza Biscuits

#### You’ll need:

- 1 (10-count) package refrigerated biscuits
- 5 tablespoons tomato sauce

- 1/2 tablespoon Italian seasoning
- 1/4 cup mozzarella cheese



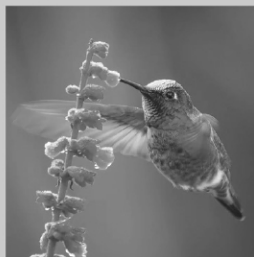
\* You’ll need an adult’s help with this recipe.

#### What to do:

1. Place biscuits in pockets of a greased muffin tin (larger size). Press biscuits flat.
2. Mix Italian seasoning into tomato sauce.
3. Spoon 1/2 tablespoon of mixture on top of each pressed-down biscuit.
4. Sprinkle 1/4 cup cheese evenly over all biscuits.
5. Bake at 350 degrees for 10 to 12 minutes or until done.

### ROOTONYM®

by Jan & Carey Orr Cook



Study the definition. When you know the missing word, fill in the letter boxes and the sentence blanks.

Answers: Beak, Dive, Wings, Speed.

1. Long, hooked shape for the mouth of a bird (4-letter noun)

□ □ □ □

2. To fly headfirst quickly down from above (4-letter verb)

□ □ □ □

3. Birds’ body parts that allow them to fly (5-letter plural noun)

□ □ □ □ □

4. To move fast; to go quickly; to race (5-letter verb)

□ □ □ □ □

1. A hummingbird uses its long \_\_\_\_\_ to eat its food.
2. We watch birds \_\_\_\_\_ from the branch to the feeder.
3. It’s surprising to see a bird’s \_\_\_\_\_ move so quickly.
4. Ana can’t believe how the birds \_\_\_\_\_ along.

## Mini Jokes



**Harlan:** Why does a hummingbird hum?

**Henrietta:** Because it doesn’t know the words!

## Eco Note



Octopuses are being observed and photographed using discarded cans, bottles and other trash as shelter, and even places to safely lay their eggs, hidden from predators. Researcher Maira Proietti at Brazil’s Federal University of Rio Grande says her team examined hundreds of images to see how the creatures are using such trash. “They clearly see that there’s a lot of litter around, and it can therefore act as a kind of artificial camouflage,” said Proietti.

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## For later:

Look in your newspaper for articles about signs of spring in your area.

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