

Where Are My Hummingbirds?

AGRI-VIEWS

by Chuck Otte, Geary County Extension Agent

In the past couple of weeks I have been asked many times, “where are my hummingbirds?” Just to get it straightened out first thing, no major catastrophe has befallen Ruby-throated Hummingbirds! This spring was a bit unusual, weather wise, which has led to some of the things we have seen or not seen!

Hummingbirds returned to Kansas the latter half of April right about on schedule. Most spring migrants move with the weather and the wind. If the wind is in the south they move north but if the wind switches to the north, migration tends to stall until it switches back to a southerly flow. This spring we had a lot of north winds which tended to stall migration for several days in a row. When the winds did switch back to the south they were often very strong winds. Many of the migrants took off with these south winds and tried to make up for lost time.

While some people reported normal numbers of spring hummingbirds at their feeders, others reported very few. By late May, most migrant hummingbirds, a vast majority of those that come through Kansas, have moved on to their breeding grounds north of here so all we have left then in June and the first half of July are the birds that remained to nest. If you are seeing few or no hummingbirds at your feeders then you likely do not have any hummingbirds nesting in your immediate area. If you had birds visiting your feeders in June and early July in past years, and now suddenly none, it can be due to several factors. “Your” hummers may have not survived the winter either due to old age or predation. The hummers may have survived but simply found a location that they like better. Loss of trees either in your own yard or anywhere in the neighborhood can cause a shift in where birds choose to nest. I also feel that many backyard hummingbird feeder watchers remember the number of birds they had at the end of last summer and think that they should have those numbers now.

Once we get to the third and fourth week of July, southbound hummingbird migration begins. In the spring, the hummingbirds are all geared up for the nesting season and can't wait to get to the nesting areas. That strong drive is over now and southbound migration is much more leisurely. Adult males migrate first followed by the adult females and then the young of the year are the last ones to arrive and move through. Southbound migration hits full swing by mid August and continues into the first couple of weeks of September, tapering off with just a few stragglers still present in early October.

If you are not seeing any hummingbirds now it is still okay to leave the feeders up but just fill it about 1/4 full so you don't go through so much nectar. Once you start seeing more activity you can start filling it fuller. If you don't have a feeder up now, plan to put one up about the end of the third week of July. Once you start seeing an increase in activity, you may want to put up more feeders and enjoy the show!

I encourage homeowners not to use the packaged mixes but use granulated sugar and water. The nectar does not need to be red. Some research has indicated that the red dye may not be good for the birds. Just use one part sugar to four parts water. You don't have to boil the water, but warm water will dissolve the sugar quicker. Clean the feeder with a brush at each filling. In really hot weather, the nectar may need to be changed every day or every other day. If the nectar in the feeder is getting cloudy, it's time to change it. So get your feeders cleaned and filled and get ready for the show to begin!