

Text and Photograph by Alan Murphy



One of the greatest birthday gifts I get every September is the visit of Ruby-throated Hummingbirds to my yard on their return to the tropics, where they will spend the winter. I live in Houston, Texas, which is along the Ruby-throats' migratory route. Each hummingbird tends to fol-

low the same flight path it did when it first made the trip. Researchers believe this path is set pretty much for life. Before Ruby-throated Hummingbirds head off over the Gulf of Mexico on that long flight, they stage near the Texas coast to build up fat reserves. Before a hummingbird sets out on trans-Gulf migration, it needs to eat a lot of insects and nectar to fatten up. A hummingbird will gain 25–40% of its body weight before it starts migration. If a large bird gained that much weight, it would not be able to get off the ground!

This additional fat will be used as energy on the 500-mile flight over water, quite amazing for a bird that weighs about the same as two paper clips. To build up this fat reserve, Ruby-throats spend many days at feeders drinking sugar water and feeding on small insects. On good days there can be up to 30 Ruby-throated Hummingbirds fighting for a spot at my feeders.

This feeding frenzy (called hyperphagia) can create some great photographic opportunities. Every fall I get ready by making a few adjustments to the way I set up my hummingbird feeders. The first thing I do is set a feeder hanging just a couple of feet off the ground. That way I have a nice green lawn to use as my background. I also make sure that I place the feeder well away from any trees or natural perches. This allows me to place a perch of my choice near the feeder and, with some luck, to get the hummingbird to land on it.

Hummingbirds are fierce defenders of their food sources,

so when they find a feeder or patch of flowers, they like to perch above the food so that they can keep an eye out for other intruding hummingbirds. I like to take advantage of this aspect of hummingbird behavior by placing my perch a couple of feet above the feeder. If there are no other perch options in the area, the hummingbird will quickly take to your perch. I like to use small perches that have a diameter about the same size as the grip of the birds' feet. This makes a more pleasing image, one in which the bird is not dominated by a large perch. Once the bird has gotten used to the perch, you should be able to switch it out for another one and get a variety of different looks for your photos. Ruby-throated Hummingbirds are creatures of habit and will return to the same perch over and over—as long as there is food.

To get this image, I set up a portable blind about 12 feet from the feeder and used my Nikon 600mm lens on a Nikon D2Xs camera. Shorter lenses will work fine. You just need to move the blind closer to get the bird larger in the frame. Hummingbirds are very small, of course, so I also used a 1.4 teleconverter to magnify the lens to get the bird a nice size within the frame.

Once the bird settled down on my perch, I got many frames showing the bright ruby-red gorget. Every now and again another hummer would buzz by the feeder and chase after "my" perched bird. On one occasion, the perched hummer just stayed on the perch but flared up his tail and wings and started calling, mouth wide open. It all happened so fast that I didn't realize I got this shot until I looked at my images on the LCD screen on the back of the camera afterwards.

Hummingbird photography can be very rewarding and fun. You don't have to travel far to find hummingbirds, they are tame enough for close approach, and they will come to feeders. There are many great photos of hummingbirds in flight but not many of them perched with nice backgrounds and pretty perches. These little jewels give me so much joy, and I can't wait for migration every year.

Alan Murphy is a full-time bird photographer who leads bird photography workshops. Please check out Murphy's website <alanmurphyphotography.com> to browse photos online and to learn more about photography workshops.