



Males attract mates with an iridescent flash of bright red.



Ruby-throated hummingbirds are tiny — but they sure have talent

Little big lives

By Tim Tiner

Powered by chest muscles comprising one third of their bodies, ruby-throated hummingbirds can hover like bees, wings a blur, or zip in any direction in the blink of an eye. Famed for migrating non-stop across the Gulf of Mexico, these wonders of avian engineering nest in early summer as far north as the boreal forest from Newfoundland to the Rockies.

COZY QUARTERS Over six to 10 days, a female bird weaves thistle-down and other seed fluff into a dainty, Timbit-sized nest, binding and fastening it with spider silk onto a thin tree branch about two storeys up. She camouflages the nest with lichens, bud scales, and flakes of bark.

SEDUCTIVE MANOEUVRES Upon finishing their nests, the white-necked hens sally into separate, fiercely defended, male feeding territories. A resident responds with frenzied precision dives, tracing a steep arc directly above his visitor, his

wings producing high-pitched trills. Mating lasts a few seconds, after which males fly off, squeaking in triumph.

CONSTANT CRAVINGS Ruby-throats must eat every 10 minutes or so, often knocking back half their weight in food a day. Flowers such as wild columbine fuel them with sugary nectar that's almost instantly digestible. But hummingbirds stock up even more from trees tapped by yellow-bellied sapsuckers. Insects and spiders probably provide the most nourishment, especially for nesting females.

SOLO NESTING A mother hummer tends two white, pea-sized eggs on her own for 12 to 14 days, punctuated by frequent two- or three-minute snack breaks. After the nestlings fledge, when they're about three weeks old, females, no longer tied to their forest nests, start turning up more often in meadows and other open areas around midsummer. 🐦

THAT'S SO MONEY

Average weights, in Canadian nickels (4 g)



Ruby-throated hummingbird
1 nickel



Great grey owl
285 nickels



Trumpeter swan
2,835 nickels



Chad Kroeger,
1/4 of Nickelback
21,500 nickels

ROBERT MCCAW