



Tales from a  
**Sisters Naturalist**  
by Jim Anderson

**Hummingbirds in winter – what do we do?**

The topic of a lot of my phone calls, emails and text messages this fall has been about hummingbirds and feeders in winter.

Right off the bat, sugar water is not “food” for hummingbirds. Like humans with soda pop, the birds get an instant shot of energy from sugar water in the feeder, but there’s not enough nutrition in it to keep them healthy.

When hummers poke their long beaks into blossoming flowers, there’s a lot more going on than guzzling nectar. There’s a trillion species of tiny arthropods (animals with jointed legs) that are also inside that flower the hummingbirds scrounge in for nectar.

Every one of them has what hummingbirds require for sustenance, which plain old sugar water does not supply.

Hummingbirds can get hooked on feeders. They see the red which attracts them to come look at the device; then they spy the hole and bingo! They’re hooked. It wouldn’t surprise me if researchers also found that hummingbirds — zipping along at 60 mph — can recognize the shape of a feeder from a long distance and will suddenly change course and stop by for a quick shot of energy.

Please do not use food coloring in the sugar water. If the feeder is red, that’s good

enough. Stay away from commercial hummingbird solution with food-coloring in it. The chemicals used to create coloring can’t be good for hummingbirds, and from what I’ve read about it, even if it’s approved by some government agency, it ain’t good for humans either.

But what to do about hummers in winter? Here’s what I do, and I’m beginning to wonder if I’m doing it right. Just about the time we have our first really organized frost that leaves ice on the windshield of my trusty old Toyota 4Runner way past sunup, I take my feeder in that night.

As the days continue to get colder I make it a point to watch the spot where the feeder was hanging, looking for any sign of a hummer searching for it. If one turns up I’ll refill the feeder and bring it back into service for as long as the days stay warm. My thinking is the hummer has been here before while migrating south and needs that charge of energy to keep going on. But as soon as the frost nights return I take it back in, wash it out, rinse it well and put it away for the winter.

Then when I take a trip around Central Oregon, what do I see hanging in plain site? Yep: hummingbird feeders.

I called two of my best sources for birds about

hummingbird feeders in winter and both told me they left their feeders up all winter and only took them in at night to keep them from freezing. That really troubled me because I was (and to some extent, still am) convinced that leaving feeders up in winter will only keep a hummer here in winter where it will eventually freeze to death.

Hummers can go into a “torpor,” a state of mental and physical inactivity, with partial or total insensibility and lowered physiological activity. It’s also typically characterized by reduced metabolism, heart rate, respiration and body temperature.

This will increase the tolerance for withstanding the intense cold for as long as 36 hours, maybe to the point of protecting a hummer when the outside temperature goes down to zero. But in Sisters Country and the countryside round about, that low can go on for as long as a week, or longer, with several days of temperatures below the freezing point during the day.

I wonder if a hummer can wake up enough during the sunny day to fly over to a feeder, get some slurps of warm sugar water and then settle into another torpor for a few days. I hope so.

In reference to hummingbird winter migration and feeders, the Cornell Lab of



PHOTO BY SUE ANDERSON

Adult male rufous hummingbird refueling for its long migration to Mexico.

Ornithology states: “A number of factors trigger the urge for birds to migrate, but the most significant one is day length. When the days get shorter, the hummingbirds will move on, regardless of whether there are still filled feeders available for them.

“We do, however, encourage people to keep their hummingbird feeders full for several weeks after they have seen the last hummer, just in case there are stragglers in need of additional energy before they complete their long journey south.”

Does that mean leave them up all winter? Makes me wonder...

And then there’s this from the Seattle Audubon Society: “There are many

documented reports of hummingbirds that survive the snow and freezing temperatures. In fact, Anna’s hummingbird winter in the state of Washington where they endure cold periods well — as long as they have food sources.”

So I’ll leave it up to you. If you feel leaving your feeder out during the day in winter is doing the right thing for a hummer who didn’t get into the migration frame of mind, then so be it. But please take it in at night to keep it from freezing. Who knows, with climate change upon us, maybe a Mexican long-tongued bat may wander through and stop by your feeder for a shot of energy as well.

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Donald J. Miller is a humanitarian and conservation photographer with a passion for enhancing appreciation of the biosphere and awareness of the challenges facing our planet. He has a special interest in elephants after photographing them in 1983 at Washington Park Zoo (Oregon Zoo). Miller’s lecture will explore the sophisticated nature of elephant society and communication as illustrated by the research of biologists Katy Payne and Caitlin O’Connell and enhanced by the volunteer desert elephant conservation work Miller has done with Elephant Human Relations Aid in Namibia, Africa.

Also trained as a registered nurse, Miller has done volunteer medical work in El Salvador, Haiti, and China. His travels contribute to the creation of his humanitarian images. “Invisible Gift” is the title of his new print display featuring images expressing goodwill — that non-material, seemingly invisible gift — shared among people of the world. [www.delicatelightphotography.com](http://www.delicatelightphotography.com)

**This lecture is co-sponsored by Friends of the Sisters Library and the Jim Anderson Chair.**

**Tuesday, November 28**  
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