

# Bee Hummingbirds

The world's smallest birds are larger than life.

◆ A flash of shimmering color, a whirring sound, tiny wings beating too fast to track—is that an insect you've spotted, darting from flower to flower at the edge of the forest?

Maybe. But if you're in Cuba, and are very lucky, it might instead be a bee hummingbird.

If species had trophy cases, this hummingbird's would be full. Officially the world's smallest bird, each one is only about the size of an AA battery. Males weigh less than a US dime, while females tip the scales at a little more than a penny. Researchers credit these

**RANGE:** Cuba, including the Isla de la Juventud

**SPECIES:** Bee hummingbird (*Mellisuga helenae*), also known as zunzuncito



hummingbirds with the largest proportionate heart weight of any animal, as well as the highest body temperature.

This big heart goes incredibly fast—about 1,200 beats per minute—to power the hummingbird's busy lifestyle. These miniature flyers spend more of their life in the air than any other animal. Each individual may visit some 1,500 different flowers daily, consuming the equivalent of her body weight in nectar and insects while the sun is up and sleeping in a state of torpor to save energy during the night. (A bee hummingbird requires 10 times more calories relative to body size than a marathon runner.)

Along the way, these tiny birds rack up more achievements. They can reach speeds of up to 30 miles per hour (48 kph), stop suddenly in midair, hover in place, and fly in all directions, including straight up, backward, and upside down. Everyday wing speed reaches 80 beats per minute, about eight times as fast as the blink of a human eye.

During the late spring mating season, everything ramps up even further. Males—already garbed handsomely in iridescent greenish blue—develop brilliant red coloring on their heads and throats, including long feathers that sprout from their heads like a glorious avian version of muttonchop sideburns. A courting male's wings can beat an extraordinary 200 times per second as he performs elaborate ascents and dives while opening and closing his tail feathers like a fan.



*A bee hummingbird's heart beats 1,200 times per minute.*