



# A Delicate Messenger Visits My Garden

Joys and sorrows may be marked by our garden visitors

The Anna's hummingbird is a relative new comer to Yakima.  
CAROL BARANY PHOTO

**For information on the Yakima County Master Gardeners Program:**

<https://extension.wsu.edu/yakima/home-garden/master-gardeners/>



Last year, a dear woman asked my wood-working husband to carve a Cardinal (*Cardinalis cardinalis*) for a friend in the Midwest who had just lost her husband. We thought it was an unusual gift, until she explained that this scarlet bird, at home across the eastern half of the United States, has held a place in local lore for centuries.

According to one legend, “Cardinals appear when angels are near.” As messengers from heaven, they’re sent to assure us that our loved ones are never far away. I understand how narratives like this get started. I feel the same way about hummingbirds.

## **Hummingbirds came with grief**

For years, no matter how many flowers I offered, hummingbirds rarely visited my garden. That changed one unforgettable May morning eight years ago, a time in my life of deep sadness.

Walking through my garden at dawn, a whirring vibration across the back of my bare legs stopped me in my tracks. In a split second, a shimmering hummingbird helicoptered up to face me. Totally unexpected, it was a joyful

reminder that the glorious beauty of creation would thrill, nurture, and sustain me. That tiny bird brought hope when I needed it most.

I'm so thankful that hummingbirds continue to visit my garden, and a few hang around all winter.

Washington's three native hummers, the Rufous, Calliope, and Black-Chinned, arrive in the Yakima Valley in early spring and usually depart by October for their winter range.

Washington's fourth hummingbird is a fairly new arrival. Until the 1930s, the Anna's hummingbird (*Calypte anna*) ventured no farther north than San Francisco, California. By 1944, it was seen in Oregon, then reaching Seattle twenty years after that. The year-round presence of Anna's hummingbirds on the east side of the Cascades is a fairly recent event.

Weighing a much as a nickel, the Anna's was first described in 1829 by a French naval surgeon and naturalist. He collected the bird for the Second Duke of Rivoli, who named it for his wife, Anna de Belle Masséna.

You've probably seen Anna's. Males have iridescent dark rose-red throats and crowns, which may appear black or dark purple in low light. The underside is mostly grey and the back a metallic green. Females have light grey chests with white and red spotting on the throat, metallic green backs, and white-tipped tails.

These mesmerizing birds have the highest metabolic rate of any animal on earth, with the exception of insects. Eating every 10-15 minutes, they can visit up to 2,000 flowers a day, slurping nectar at 13 licks/second. In addition to nectar, hummingbirds eat small insects even during the coldest periods to meet their protein, vitamin, and mineral needs. This translates to eating up to half their body mass and drinking eight times their body mass daily.

Anna's hummingbirds survive cold Yakima winters by going into "torpor". In this state, their body temperature drops from 104°F to 48.2°F and their respiratory rate slows from 245 breaths per minute to six.

Three years ago, during an unusually snowy Yakima winter, I watched a female Anna's perch almost lifeless in the branches of our overgrown Kiwi vine. A feeder was nearby, and

the Kiwi's tangled branches offered a measure of shelter. Come evening, she flew off, but returned in the morning for several weeks. This year, I see a female take at my feeder every morning at 7:00 a.m.

She'll convert that sugar to fat, which keeps her alive during nighttime torpor. An Anna's can gain 16 percent of its body weight during the day and use it all up during a cold night. If you were a 150 pound hummingbird, this means you would wake up 24 pounds lighter.

Extended periods of cold are grueling, and some birds won't survive. If hummingbirds are accustomed to feeding in your yard, continue to offer nectar. Studies prove that hummers migrate when instinct tells them to go. Nothing short of injury or illness will keep them from leaving. Availability of food has little to do with their decision to stay.

I use a simple recipe. Bring one part sugar (no substitutes) and four parts water to a boil and allow to cool. Don't add red dye, or change the concentration. Clean the feeder weekly during cold weather.

The mix begins to freeze around 29°F, so rotating feeders throughout the day will keep the fluid moving. Hummingbirds don't feed at night, so you can bring the feeders indoors then. Feeding could begin at dawn, so get them out early. I make it easier by using a heated feeder. A 7 watt bulb keeps the nectar from freezing down to 1°F. You can find these heated feeders online.

For the birds and the bees and my amazing readers, I give thanks. The Yakima Valley is this gardener's joy.

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**For more information on Anna's Hummingbirds, visit the website: [https://www.allaboutbirds.org/guide/Annas\\_Hummingbird/id](https://www.allaboutbirds.org/guide/Annas_Hummingbird/id)**