

WINGED JEWELS

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I believe that I can say without fear of contradiction that the most remarkable bird in the avian kingdom is the diminutive Hummingbird.

They are the smallest of all birds, but are among the most delightful. Over 300 species inhabit the Western Hemisphere. They are tiny, jewel-like creatures bestowed with names like “Ruby” and “Topaz.”

They display an array of shimmering reds, blues, and lavenders, but surprisingly, their plumage contains just two pigments—black and brown. The appearance of color is caused by light reflected off the dense microscopic structure of their feathers. The hue and intensity of color varies with the level of light and the observer’s angle of view.

Like all birds, the hummer spends a lot of time taking care of its feathers, which are among its most precious assets. The hummingbird molts before it is a year old, then annually after that. Between 20 and 40 percent of its energy is expended in shedding and re-growing feathers.

The flight of the Broad-tailed Hummingbird (*Selasphorus platycercus*) is at once its most familiar and astonishing talent. It is able to hang suspended in mid-air, or zip in any direction with complete ease.

More than any other creature, the hummingbird is built for speed. Its wings beat 75 times per second, creating a buzz that gives the bird its name. Equally impressive is its remarkable endurance. Twice annually it migrate between northern ranges and wintering havens in the south. Remarkably, the 500 plus-mile trip across the Gulf of Mexico is made without a single stop.



Eulampis jugularis
1992, Sc#1649



Chlorostilbon swainsonii
1992, Sc#1645



Eulampis holosericeus
1976, Sc#469



Eulampis jugularis
1976, Sc#467



Calliphlox evelynae
1989, Sc#670



Orthorhyncus cristatus
1976, Sc#405



Eulampis jugularis
1969, Sc#241



Selasphorus rufus
1989, Sc#671



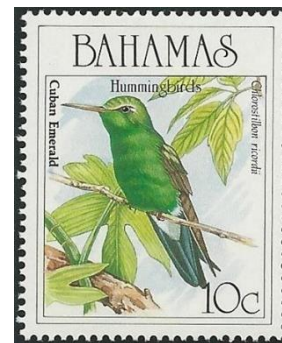
Anthracothorax viridis
1992, Sc#1650



Anthracothorax dominicus
1992, Sc#1654



Archilochus colubris
1989, Sc#669



Chlorostilbon ricordii
1989, Sc#668



Orthorhynchus cristatus
1979, Sc#501



Cyanophaea bicolor
1994, Sc#1656



Eulampis holosericeus
1979, Sc#504

The smallest of the species, the Cuban Bee Hummingbird (*Mellisuga helenae*) is the tiniest bird in the world, measuring just over two inches (5 cm) long and weighing under two grams (less than one-tenth of an ounce). By contrast, the largest member of the family, the Giant Hummingbird (*Patagona gigas*), is about 7½ inches (19 cm) long and weighs 20 grams (three-quarters of an ounce). Its heart can pump up to a staggering 1,260 beats per minute, more than 125 times faster than the heart of an average human being.

Although this tiny bird weighs a mere one-eighth of an ounce, it is fearless and irascible, and has been known to attack crows, hawks, and even eagles with its needle-like bill.

Flower nectar provides a source of quick energy for its whirlwind life, and the hummingbird is especially fond of brightly colored blooms. To fuel its full-burn lifestyle, a hummingbird devours half its body weight in food each day without gaining weight.

A hummingbird's nest is a fairy-like construction, a walnut-sized cradle spun from gossamer and cottony plant fibers. The little cups often are suspended by spider silk from cave ceilings, but usually fastened to a twig. A tiny lump of dirt is built ingeniously into the side of the nest to counterbalance the weight of the female as she incubates her pea-sized eggs.

Throughout the ages the diminutive hummingbird has been admired for its beauty. Going back a few hundred years, the people who inhabited the plains of Nazca in southern Peru were moved to "picture" a hummer on the desert floor by laying out stones in the form of the bird's body. That piece of art can still be viewed from the air and admired to this day.