Host a winter hummingbird
By Donna Legare
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Many people in the Tallahassee area enjoy ruby-throated hummingbirds during summer and fall but are not aware that a hummingbird might spend the winter in their yard.

People take down their feeders during late fall because of the mistaken idea that feeders will entice hummingbirds to remain and then succumb to cold weather. When it is time for ruby-throated hummingbirds to migrate, they will depart with or without your feeders.

Most ruby-throated hummingbirds are genetically programmed to migrate to the tropics by the middle of November. However, a few ruby-throated hummingbirds do stay for the winter, and small numbers of several species of Western hummingbirds migrate to spend the winter in the Eastern United States.

Hummingbird banders working with the Hummer/Bird Study Group have banded 13 kinds of hummingbirds in the Eastern United States:

- ruby-throated
- black-chinned
- rufous
- Allens
- Annas
- Calliope
- buff-bellied
- broad-tailed
- white-eared
- green violet-ear
- magnificent
- broad-billed
- green-breasted mango

HBSG suggests you leave a feeder up all winter, and you may have one of these visitors spend the season with you. They are cold-hardy and will not be harmed by the mild winter weather in this area.

You should put your feeder where it can be observed and maintained easily. It is not necessary to buy ready-made nectar, since the birds get all the vitamins, minerals and protein they need from natural nectar and insects they eat. Partially fill your feeder with a mixture of one part table sugar to four parts water, but do not use food coloring. Do not use honey or artificial sweeteners because they are harmful to the birds.

Wintering hummingbirds are not lost birds. They often demonstrate great site fidelity and spend the entire winter in one location. Some return to winter at the same home year after year and are considered family members. A rufous hummingbird in Alabama has returned to a home for seven winters, and a buff-bellied hummingbird has spent eight winters at a home in Pensacola.

HBSG has a continuing research project to document wintering hummingbirds.

If you have a hummingbird at your feeder between now and March 1, contact Fred Bassett of Montgomery, Ala., the hummingbird bander for the Tallahassee area. You can reach him by e-mail at fhound@aol.com or by
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telephone at (334) 244-0227, or call Native Nurseries at 386-8882. Bassett will come to your home and capture, identify, band and photograph your hummingbird. He will let you release it back into your yard and send you photographs. Banding will not harm your hummingbird or cause it to leave your yard.

Last winter in South Alabama and the Florida Panhandle, Bassett banded 188 wintering hummingbirds of seven species. In the Tallahassee area, he banded 26 hummingbirds including 14 rufous, nine ruby-throated, and three black-chinned.

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