

They feed on a wide range of common wild and garden plants. These include honeysuckle, lady's bedstraw, red valerian and phlox. They prefer those with plenty of nectar and a long calyx, the collection of sepals, which their proboscis enables them to reach more easily than other insects. They are creatures of habit, often flying around in a regular circuit, visiting the same plants again and again.

Early arrival

The first hummingbird hawkmoths of the year are usually seen in south-western or southern counties of England in early May. They can arrive as early as April in fine springs, following southerly winds. These strong-flying insects have come all the way from Spain, Portugal, or North Africa. Some continue much further. In Britain, they have been recorded as far north as Orkney and Shetland.

They prefer warm, sunny daytime weather, but will also fly at dawn and dusk, and even during light rain. They have excellent colour vision, which is also very sharp, to enable them to fix on a particular flower while hovering to feed.

Hummingbird hawkmoths are long lived compared to other moths, with an adult lifespan of two to three months.

After mating, the females lay up to 200 spherical eggs, which measure just 1mm across, from May onwards. Each is laid on a separate plant. They are pale green in colour, mimicking the buds of their main host plant, lady's bedstraw. This helps them avoid the attention of predators such as birds. Other host plants include hedge bedstraw, wild madder, and red valerian.

The eggs hatch between six and eight days after laying. The larvae begin to feed avidly, so they can grow as quickly as possible. When they hatch out, the tiny larvae are yellow, but

*“Lovely in dye and fan,
A-tremble in shimmering grace,
A moth from her winter swoon
Uplifts her face:”*

Walter de la Mare, ‘The Moth’

they soon turn green, with pale and dark horizontal stripes along the body and a blue ‘horn’ with a yellow tip. They use these bright colours and oddly shaped head parts to scare off potential predators, such as songbirds. Approximately three weeks after hatching, now approximately 2½in (6cm) long, they pupate. The pupa drops to the ground, where its pale brown colour enables it to be disguised among the leaf litter.

Months later, in mid or late autumn, the pupa hatches into the adult hummingbird hawkmoth. This new generation then seeks out a sheltered spot to hibernate for the winter. It may be in a hole in a wall or tree, or sometimes in an outbuilding, such

The chequered body and grey forewings of the hummingbird hawkmoth. Its orange hindwings are only evident in flight.



A hummingbird hawkmoth caterpillar, with its yellow-tipped blue horn. The caterpillars tend to be green when first hatched, turning darker as they grow and moult the skin which no longer fits.

