

PHOTOGRAPHING HUMMINGBIRDS IN NATURAL LIGHT

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There is a profound beauty in capturing hummingbirds using only natural light—no flashes, no studio setups—just the bird, the sun, and your patience. Natural-light photography unveils the true character of the hummingbird: its shimmer in the sunlight, its delicate feathers, its speed, and its grace. But hummingbirds are fast. Really fast. The key to success lies in understanding how to gather enough light while managing the exposure triangle—shutter speed, aperture, and ISO—so that you can either freeze the action or allow motion where desired.

Before you set about trying to capture images of hummingbirds, immerse yourself in their world. Spend a lot of time simply observing them. Knowing your subject is one of a photographer's main assets, and it's a way to connect with the natural world around you.



This Black-eared Fairy was captured while visiting this photogenic flower in eastern Brazil

By noting their patterns, you can predict their movements and plan your shots accordingly. Hummingbirds are creatures of habit, especially in their perching spots. By following them with binoculars, you can discover their favorite hangouts and assess the lighting and composition of those locations. If you don't disrupt their routine, you can use it to your advantage. Hummingbirds are fast and fearless, quickly getting used to the presence of gear like a tripod and a camera.

Below are practical, field-tested tips to help you get great results.

1. Know your camera and lens:



This is essential, since you have already made a serious investment. Please watch YouTube videos and familiarize yourself with the different buttons and menus, as well as learn the sweet spot for greater sharpness on your lens.

Shutter Speed: This is your most important setting. If you want **sharp wings**, aim for a shutter speed of **1/2000s or faster**. If you prefer **an artistic motion blur** (a softer look that conveys movement), try a slower sometimes a little wing blur adds life to the image.



This Amethyst-throated Sunangel was captured at 1/160 speed.

Aperture: Use a **wide aperture (f/4 to f/5.6)**. This allows more light to pass through, creating a beautiful, soft background (bokeh) that effectively isolates the hummingbird. If there is enough available light you can decrease the aperture to f8 so that the entire bird may appear in focus.

The distance between the bird and the background is essential in giving those appealing out-of-focus backdrops of dreamy quality.

ISO: Keep ISO **as low as possible** to minimize digital noise. In bright sun: ISO **200–400** works well. **Shade or overcast:** ISO **800–1600+**, depending on your camera's noise performance. Modern cameras handle higher ISO

(5600 or even 8000) surprisingly well—don't be afraid to raise it if needed to maintain shutter speed.

Focus: Use **continuous autofocus** (AI Servo for Canon, AF-C for Nikon/Sony) so the camera keeps tracking the bird. Alternatively, **pre-focus** on a flower or perch where the bird consistently returns—hummingbirds are creatures of habit. With more expensive cameras, activating the eye-focus search is a welcome asset.

Drive Mode: Set your camera to **high-speed continuous shooting**. You're not taking one picture—you're capturing a fraction of a second of wing beats.

Shooting Mode: A great approach is to use **Aperture Priority** or **Manual Mode with Auto ISO**. This allows you to control depth of field and shutter speed while the camera handles changes in light.



The body of this Blue-throated Goldentail is sharp thanks to an aperture of f8

A long glass i.e.: a telephoto or zoom reaching 400 mm always helps, so aim to get what you can afford. Long focal length lenses provide greater isolation from the background, allowing the photographer to be further away from the subject. This lends itself to excellent action-photography practice.

Fast Autofocus (AF) is not particularly important for perched birds; however, it becomes crucial as you transition from perched to in-flight shots. The better the AF performance, the more keepers. AF is one of the few areas where more expensive cameras will produce markedly better results than cheaper ones.

Positioning: Try to keep the **sun behind you**. When sunlight strikes the hummingbird from the front, its iridescent feathers glow like stained glass. If the bird is backlit, it often looks dark. When a bird is side-lighted, that will help to create volume and 3-D effect.



This Fawn-breasted brilliant conveys a feeling of movement combined with a complimentary background.

Timing: The **Golden hour** (just after sunrise and before sunset) creates warm, gentle tones. But unlike many genres of photography, **midday sun can be your friend**. Bright, overhead light helps you achieve those superfast shutter speeds needed to freeze wings. Use fill flash to open shadows.

Background: A clean background is almost as necessary as the bird itself. A **distant green hedge** works beautifully. Or place a **solid-colored board** far behind the feeding area to keep it blurred and unobtrusive. Avoid bright patches, distracting branches, filtered light, or clutter.



This Festive Coquette rested on a photogenic perch placed next to the hummingbird feeder.

Attracting Hummingbirds: Hang **feeders** with a **1:4 sugar-to-water** ratio (no dye, please). Keep feeders **clean**—mold forms quickly—plant **native, nectar-rich flowers**, especially those with red, orange, and pink colors. Hummingbirds will learn your routine—they return to reliable food sources. Place a photogenic perch next to the feeder where hummingbirds can rest and feed.

Patience is a virtue in bird photography, especially when it comes to hummingbirds. Set your camera on a tripod, relax, and observe. Hummingbirds often fly in predictable loops. After a few minutes of quiet watching, you'll know exactly where to aim. This patience and observation are what will help you capture the perfect shot.

Pay Attention to Ethics. Some might argue that setting up feeders impacts hummingbirds' behavior; however, hummers have become so accustomed to feeders that they have adapted to detect them and use them. It is essential to know that hummingbirds do not become dependent upon feeders—sure, they make feeding a little more convenient. Still, hummers will cover several square miles looking for flowers with nectar and insects, no matter how many feeders are around.



This Fiery-throated hummingbird from Costa Rica is displaying its iridescence with all its glory.

Final Thoughts: Photographing hummingbirds using natural light is both a technical challenge and a meditation. It teaches patience, observation, and appreciation. When the light catches their feathers just right and you hear the faint hum of their wings, you're not just taking a picture—you're having a moment with one of nature's miracles. Bring your curiosity. Bring your camera. And enjoy the dance.