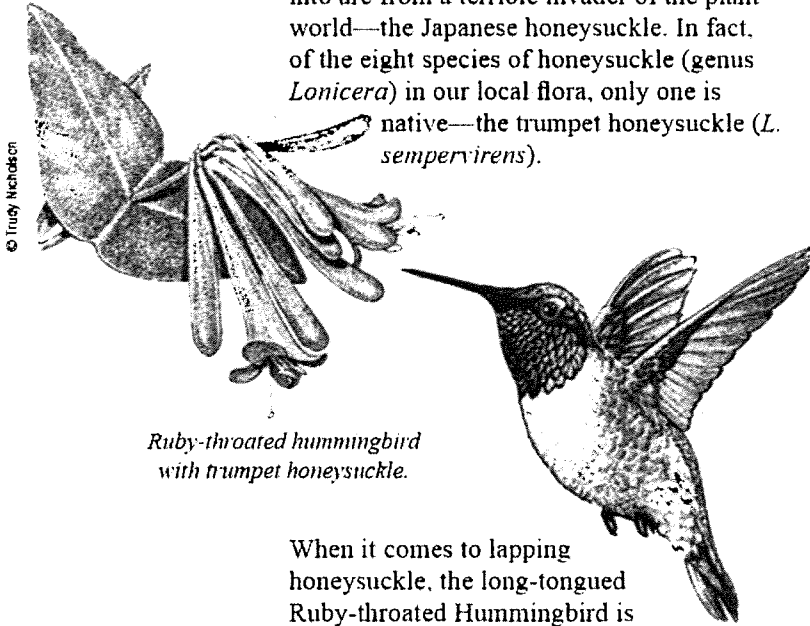


## Honeysuckle and Hummingbirds

Honeysuckle.

The very name conjures up summer and happy childhood memories. But the flowers kids bite into are from a terrible invader of the plant world—the Japanese honeysuckle. In fact, of the eight species of honeysuckle (genus *Lonicera*) in our local flora, only one is native—the trumpet honeysuckle (*L. sempervirens*).



Ruby-throated hummingbird  
with trumpet honeysuckle.

When it comes to lapping honeysuckle, the long-tongued Ruby-throated Hummingbird is far more adept than humans are at reaching the bottom of the red trumpet-shaped flower and its rich supply of nectar. And here is a great story of evolution. Biologists call this relationship between a trumpet honeysuckle and the Ruby-throated Hummingbird, a mutualism where both participants gain through the interaction in the struggle to survive and pass on one's genes; the bird or insect visiting a flower benefits from a high-energy food source, and the plants spread their reproductive bits more efficiently about the landscape. The guiding theory here is that the plants succeed in having their pollen transported over greater distances and with greater accuracy with birds and insects as their emissaries than if they relied on more wasteful wind pollination.

As much as we love to bite into the back end of honeysuckle flowers, so do a group of insects that break the code of conduct between plant and pollinator. Charles Darwin himself noticed that some species of bees have learned to steal

nectar from azalea and honeysuckle flowers by piercing the flowers at the base without bothering to pollinate them. Thus, clever insects with tiny tongues, like our backyard bumblebee, turn out to be crafty nectar robbers.

Unlike the trumpet honeysuckle, the Japanese honeysuckle and its Asian cousins are aggressive invaders of our local forests. Their fruits are eaten by native birds, dispersed, and germinate everywhere. The deer don't eat them so they spread throughout the understory, choking or shading out our native plants. The last thing a Cabin John conservationist or gardener should do is grant space to a non-native honeysuckle, or worse, introduce one. Yet, largely for aesthetic reasons, I have made a special place for the Chinese exotic, *Lonicera fragrantissima*, also known as January jasmine. It's a rather scruffy-looking plant but the perfume from the blossom is the reason it is called *fragrantissima*. Imagine a honeysuckle that smells like a citrus flower and blooms along the Cabin John Creek Trail in mid-February. What better harbinger of Spring than one specimen of this bush, signaling with its intoxicating aroma the end of winter? —



Winter honeysuckle