

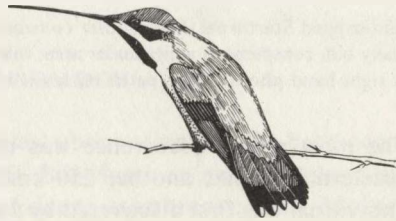
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Plain-capped Starthroats in the United States

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Additional records of this small wanderer north of the Mexican border.



Prior to 1978 the Plain-capped Starthroat *Heliomaster constantii* was recorded in the United States only once: at a feeder in Nogales, Arizona, from 20 to 30 September 1969 (Harrison 1976). During 1978 there were at least two documented U.S. occurrences and some additional probable sightings of the species — all in Arizona.

An individual making daily visits to a feeder in Patagonia was discovered by chance on 15 July by Steve Larson, from Colorado, who was passing through the area in the course of a birding trip. How long the starthroat was there before being discovered, as well as how long it might potentially have stayed, is not known. The bird disappeared on 20 July only when the owners of the property went on vacation and took down their hummingbird feeders. During its known stay, the starthroat was seen by many observers and was photographed for documentation by W. Edward Harper, George R. Beringer, and others.

Three additional sightings in the same season and area, while undocumented, are extremely interesting in light of the proven presence of the Patagonia bird. On 17 June a hummingbird with the size, shape and face-pattern of a Plain-capped Starthroat was briefly observed in Sycamore Canyon, west of Nogales, by Douglas Stotz and Susan Parker. On 24 June, Eugene Cardiff and a group of his students had excellent looks at another bird with a white rump, long bill and white eye stripe, perched in a mesquite on the hillside near the roadside rest stop on Highway 82 southwest of Patagonia. Less definite was the report of an unfamiliar large, long-billed hummingbird observed 15 July on the Circle Z Ranch property southwest of Patagonia by Liz Mills.

All of the above occurrences were close to the Mexican border, about 500 km north of the northern edge of the species' previously known range in southeastern Sonora, and all were between 1100 and 1225 m above sea level in elevation.



Plain-capped Starthroat *Heliomaster constantii*: Two views of the Phoenix individual. Note the long heavy bill, conspicuous white malar area, tuft of white flank feathers protruding above the wing, and (in right-hand photo) white patch on lower back. Photos by W. Graham Metson, Jr.

The most recent occurrence was more surprising, being in the foothills of northeastern Phoenix, another 250 km north of the previous U.S. observations. This individual was first discovered by Jo Yoba on 17 October in her yard, where it was observed almost daily for six weeks until 28 November 1978. The elevation there is 490 m, and the area, "Ocotillo Hills," is named for the predominant plant growing there. Unlike the other individuals that were frequenting feeders several times a day, the Plain-capped Starthroat in the Yobas' yard rarely went to the feeder after the first two weeks of its stay. Even during the first two weeks when it was in the yard constantly, it spent more time hovering around the clothes line capturing small insects, or resting in a palo verde tree, chinaberry, or ocotillo.

The starthroat and a male Anna's Hummingbird *Calypte anna* that was also frequenting the yard took turns chasing each other at first, but the Anna's was the more aggressive of the two. Eventually the Anna's established territorial perches in both the palo verde tree and the ocotillo, and actively chased the starthroat away if the latter tried to return to either place. During the last four weeks of its stay the starthroat spent most of its time elsewhere in the neighborhood, paying only short visits to the Yobas' yard two to four times a day, sometimes perching for a while in the chinaberry tree.

In another year the starthroat might have remained even longer, because the temperature in Phoenix rarely goes below freezing before the first of January. However, in 1978 the nights began to turn cold during the last week of November and the temperature did drop below freezing on 30 November. On the afternoon of 28 November, Jo Yoba saw the starthroat return to the feeder for about twenty minutes to take several long drinks before what was evidently its final departure.

Some observers confidently identified the Patagonia starthroat as a female (or even as an immature female) and the Phoenix individual as a male. The basis for these judgements was evidently the claim, repeated in various field guides, that the male Plain-capped Starthroat has more red on the throat than does the female. While this is probably true on the average, examination of museum specimens indicates that both sexes vary considerably in their amount of gorget color (K. Kaufman, pers. comm.); few individuals display solid bright red gorgets comparable to that illustrated by Peterson on Plate 19 of *A Field Guide to Mexican*

Birds (Peterson and Chalif 1973). In light of these variables, the allocation to sex and age of all of the Arizona starthroats must remain uncertain.

The photographs of the Patagonia and Phoenix starthroats both show white tufts of feathers on the flanks under the wings. Similar tufts were observed by Bill Harrison on the Nogales individual (Harrison 1976). This character is mentioned in none of the Mexican field guides except the one by Irby Davis (1972).

South of the United States the Plain-capped Starthroat has been found to occur in arid lowlands and foothills from sea level to 1400 m in elevation, from southern Sonora south to Costa Rica (Friedmann *et al.* 1950). Van Rossem (1945) indicated that the species had not been found north of the Alamos region in extreme southeastern Sonora, and no more northerly records were reported by Russell and Lamm (1978). However, it seems likely that further fieldwork in Sonora will turn up more northerly breeding populations between the Alamos region and the U.S. border.

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Plain-capped Starthroat *Heliomaster constantii* at feeder in Patagonia, Arizona, July 1978. Note the striking face pattern, white tuft of flank feathers, and white strip running down center of belly. Photo by W. Edward Harper.