

STAY-AT-HOME STARTHROAT

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IN his "Guide to the Birds of Trinidad and Tobago (1973)" French has this to say about the Long-billed Starthroat humming bird *Heliomaster longirostris*: "An uncommon but wide-spread species in forested country at all levels in Trinidad being seen usually in clearings, fairly high in trees; probably breeds, but most records are between December and June, so seasonal migration is likely". I want to comment here on several points in the above quotation.

I have seen the Starthroat regularly in my garden in Petit Valley during the past four or five years and I have either seen or heard it in other gardens in Petit Valley and Diego Martin. In fact, I have seen it far more often in gardens than in forest, though I have also seen it on the North Coast Road, at Caura and at Chaguaramas. Obviously then, the bird is not confined to forest, but since until recently all the gardens in which I had seen it were in the Diego Martin Valley I wondered if, to the bird, the valley were simply a large clearing in the forest. Lately, however, I have seen it in Valsayn Park and at the U.W.I. campus in St. Augustine which cannot by any stretch of the imagination be considered clearings in the forest.

The next point of interest is that to me the Starthroat, far from being uncommon, is perhaps the second most abundant humming bird after the Common Emerald, *Amazilia tobaci*. Or, to put it more accurately, I would so rate it if I had to judge the situation only from the sightings in my garden. Of course, in arriving at a proper estimate of the abundance of one species in relation to others one must take into account far more than the sightings in a single small area. Nevertheless, the Starthroat does seem to be somewhat more common than is generally supposed. Differences in plumage suggest that several birds, both male and female, visit my garden. Obviously then, there must be something attractive to them there and that something is a single shrub of *Ixora coccinea*. The Starthroats in my garden have fed almost exclusively at this one shrub which obligingly enough blooms all the year round but most abundantly in the wet season. Only once have I seen a Starthroat at the flowers of my black poui, *Tabebuia rufescens*, and once at a *Hibiscus*, and they have completely ignored all the other flowers the Common Emerald regularly feeds at: Coffee, *Lignum vitae*, *Russellia* spp., *Hamelia erecta*, *Quassia amara*, and *Porana paniculata*.

But the most important aspect of my observations is that most of them were made in the period from June to December, the very period for which observations have so far been lacking. During these months I have seen Starthroats on almost every weekend and I have noted the dates of sightings for 1974 and 1975 as shown in Table 1. Although I have not recorded the dates of sightings for 1976 the birds have again been regular visitors up to the time of writing.

These observations prove that at least some Starthroats do not migrate but remain here the year round.

I have seen the Starthroat feed at three other species of flower in addition to those mentioned already: the jumbie bead,

Erythrina pallida, Christmas Hope, *Tecoma stans*, and deer meat, *Centropogon surinamensis*. No doubt, further observation will bring additions to this meagre list. But it begins to seem as though the Starthroat is a relatively specialized feeder. My tentative hypothesis is that it finds plenty of food in the forest in the dry season when most trees are in bloom and so does not need to frequent my garden then, but in the wet season when flowering trees are scarce it finds my *Ixora*, an introduced plant, a convenient supplement to its natural food plants. Further observations in the years ahead will reveal how close to the truth my speculations are.

TABLE 1

Dates in 1974 and 1975 when Starthroats have been seen feeding at the flowers of *Ixora coccinea*. The gap in the observations for September and October 1975 coincides with a period of leave abroad.

	1974			1975			
June				1	7	15	22
July				1	12	20	26
August	4	11	18	3	10	17	24
Sept.	29						
Oct.	2	26					
Nov.	3	9	17	1	9	16	23
Dec.	1	5		15			

*The salmon variety.