

Identification of Little Woodstar *Chaetocerus bombus* in Ecuador

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Little Woodstar *Chaetocerus bombus* is listed as Vulnerable by BirdLife International, largely because its habitat is now very fragmented, and there have been comparatively few recent records¹. It occurs on Andean slopes in southern Colombia, Ecuador and northern Peru¹. Ridgely & Greenfield³ describe it as 'Rare to perhaps locally (seasonally?) uncommon' in Ecuador and list recent reports from five sites in four provinces, but state that 'In no area is the species now known to be present regularly or in large numbers.' It therefore remains rather poorly known, and is not an easy species to observe.

Between October 2003 and December 2005 there were many reports of Little Woodstars from the hummingbird feeders at Tandayapa Bird Lodge, situated at 1,750 m on the western slope of the Andes, in Pichincha province, Ecuador. All of these involved females or immatures, and as I was based at the lodge during this time, I observed many of them. It is my opinion that all of the birds I saw were Purple-throated Woodstars *Calliphlox mitchellii*. This species is much more variable than field guides suggest, and even experienced observers have been misled by some of the variations seen at Tandayapa.

To clarify the characters for identifying Little Woodstar, I examined specimens (13 females or immatures) in the Natural History Museum, Tring, UK. The results of this, and of field experience of Little and Purple-throated Woodstars in western Ecuador, are summarised below.

Identification

The features separating female Little and Purple-throated Woodstars are shown in the accompanying sketch (Fig. 1). The most frequently cited character of female Little Woodstar is the uniform cinnamon-buff or rufous underparts. In contrast, female Purple-throated Woodstars are usually depicted as having pale orange flanks and white throats. Whilst this is often the case, throat colour varies, and many have an orange wash to the throat which varies in intensity, in some being

quite strong, creating the effect of almost uniform pale orange underparts. It is such birds that are often mistaken for Little Woodstars. Two such individuals are shown in Figs. 4–5, with a more typical Purple-throated depicted in Fig. 2.

Little Woodstar should therefore not be identified solely on the basis of underparts coloration. Whilst there is a subtle colour difference (Little being cinnamon-buff, almost with a slight salmon tone, and Purple-throated being more orange and having flanks darker than the throat), and even the most orange Purple-throated usually show a slightly paler collar, these are often not easily appreciated, and other features should be used to confirm the identification. The most useful features are probably the cheek-stripe, tail pattern and the extent of the collar. If the bird has large 'sideburns', a dark central tail and a distinct collar, it is not a Little Woodstar, no matter how uniformly rufous it may appear below.

Immatures of both species possess rufous fringes to the upperparts, which are browner than in adults. Young Purple-throated are often very orange on the throat and paler orange on the flanks, creating an almost uniform orange wash to the underparts, but they still have the large 'sideburns' and breast-side collar of adults (Figs. 4–5). Adult males should be easier to identify, but the yellowish tone to the collar is often not obvious in the field. They are often best confirmed by the ruby-pink (not purple) gorget and spiky tail. They are also a colder green below, and only one of the specimens or live birds I have seen had the rufous around the thighs that is often apparent on Purple-throated: this was an 'eclipse' male, all of the full-plumaged males lacked rufous.

A further complication is the possibility of confusion with Gorgeted Woodstar *Acestrura heliodor*. Although the ranges of the two species 'barely overlap (if at all)' in Ecuador³, both species apparently do wander and can appear outside their normal ranges. Female Gorgeted Woodstar is very similar to female Little, but may be separated by the colour of the uppertail-coverts. In Gorgeted Woodstar these are usually deep rufous or broadly rufous-fringed, whereas in Little they are all green

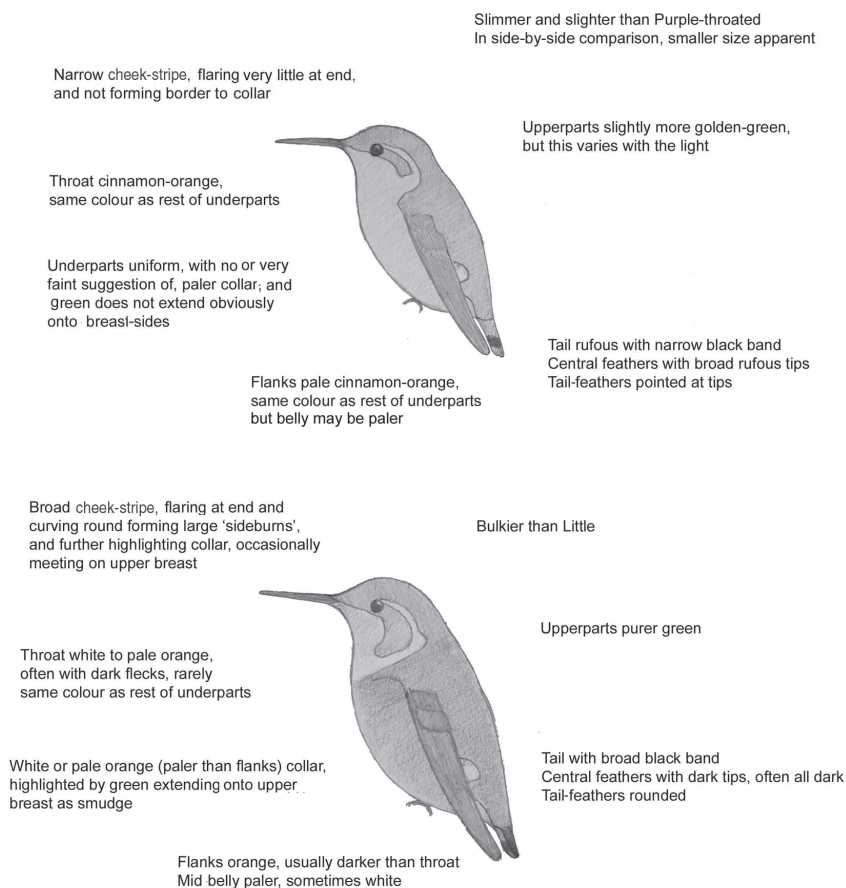


Figure 1. Comparison of females of Little Woodstar *Chaetocerus bombus* (upper bird) and Purple-throated Woodstar *Calliphlox mitchellii* (Mark Gurney)

with, at most, a few of the lowermost feathers having a pale rufous fringe. On the Tring specimens, the extent of the rufous is variable, with some Gorgeted having a very narrow band (though most show a broad band) and others almost appearing as if they have a deep rufous rump (sometimes speckled green). This is consistent with my limited experience of Gorgeted Woodstar in the field. The tail patterns of female Little and Gorgeted appear to differ². Little has the black on the second and third outermost feathers indented, leaving an almost diamond-shaped rufous tip, whereas Gorgeted has the black square-ended, projecting slightly along the shaft, leaving a triangular rufous tip. This will undoubtedly prove difficult to appreciate in the field.

Recent records of Little Woodstar

In over two years I have seen only three Little Woodstars in Pichincha: one, on 30 January 2005, at the Mindo Cloudforest Foundation's Milpe Bird Sanctuary (00°01'N 78°51'W), at 1,000 m altitude, near San Miguel de Los Bancos; another, on 11 December 2005, beside the Milpe road (00°04'N 78°55'W) at c.900 m altitude; and another, on 1 November 2004, near the Río Silanche Bird Sanctuary (Simón Bolívar road), near Pedro Vicente Maldonado. All were females and all were strikingly different from anything I have seen at Tandayapa. Purple-throated Woodstar has been recorded at all these sites, so it is not safe to assume that a woodstar at low altitude is not a Purple-throated. I know of no sites where Little Woodstar can be seen regularly in Pichincha, but I have now seen two birds on two visits almost

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exactly a year apart (7 May 2004 and 6 May 2005) flycatching from the same tree along the road to Nueva Fatima, near Sozoranga, in Loja province. My only other record is of an eclipse male 12.3 km along the road from Zumba to La Chonta, Zamora–Chinchipe. A female woodstar along the old Loja–Zamora road on 20 September 2005 was either a Little or a Gorgeted, but was far too distant to assign to species.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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REFERENCES

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3. Ridgely, R. S. & Greenfield, P. J. (2001) *The birds of Ecuador*, 2. London, UK: Christopher Helm.

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Figure 2. Adult female Purple-throated Woodstar *Calliphlox mitchellii*, Tandayapa Bird Lodge, prov. Pichincha, Ecuador, 7 May 2005 (Steve Blain / Tropical Birding): a typical individual, with white throat and collar, orange flanks, flaring 'sideburns' and broad black band on tail.



Figure 3. Male Little Woodstar *Chaetocerus bombus*, El Limón, northern Peru, March 2005 (Roger Ahlman)





Figure 4. Juvenile Purple-throated Woodstar *Calliphlox mitchellii*, Mindo, prov. Pichincha, Ecuador, 15 November 2004 (Steve Blain / Tropical Birding): the brown upperparts identify this bird as an immature; also note the very orange underparts, including the throat, which could suggest Little Woodstar *Chaetocerus bombus*, but both the collar across the upper breast and stripe behind the eye are white, whereas these areas are pale cinnamon-orange in female Little Woodstar. The large 'sideburns' are the most important feature, and these are diagnostic of Purple-throated Woodstar.



Figure 5. Juvenile Purple-throated Woodstar *Calliphlox mitchellii*, Tandayapa Bird Lodge, prov. Pichincha, Ecuador, 18 November 2004 (Steve Blain / Tropical Birding): similar to the bird in Fig. 4, but the brown fringes to the upperparts feathers are narrower. The flaring 'sideburns' identify the bird as Purple-throated Woodstar, and this is supported by the suggestion of a paler collar, bordered below by a dark spur extending onto the upper breast.