



Wildlife Note — 56
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Tanagers

By Chuck Fergus

Two tanager species migrate north from the Neotropics to breed in eastern North America. This is but a small percentage of the more than 200 species in the tanager subfamily Thraupinae, many of whose members sport dazzling colors. The word tanager comes from a South American Indian word denoting a small, brightly colored bird. In tropical forests, mixed feeding flocks may include more than a dozen species, in plumages of red, yellow, green, blue and purple.

Scarlet Tanager (*Piranga olivacea*) — The brightest red I've ever seen met my vision when I focused binoculars on a male scarlet tanager singing in a treetop: Against a backdrop of dark clouds and lit by the last rays of the evening sun, he looked positively fluorescent. Males arrive on the breeding range (eastern North America from southern Canada to the Carolinas) in late April and early May, just as trees are beginning to leaf out. Their bodies are red, and their wings and tails are jet black. Females, which show up a few days later, are a greenish yellow that blends with the leaves in which they rest and feed. Adults are about seven inches in length.

Scarlet tanagers favor dry, upland oak woods. They also inhabit mixed and coniferous forests and shade plantings in suburbs and parks. Males claim two- to six-acre territories by singing almost constantly from prominent perches and driving away competing males. The song sounds like *jeeyeet jeey jeeoo jeeyeer jeeyeet*, five to nine slightly hoarse notes ("like a robin with a sore throat," said Roger Tory Peterson). Males whose territories adjoin sometimes perch along shared boundaries and countersing. Males return to previous years' territories, but it's thought that females lack this strong homing instinct, so they rarely take the same mate in succeeding years.

Insects and fruits form the bulk of the diet. Females forage higher in the tree canopy than males. Both sexes work slowly and methodically, inspecting leaves, twigs and branches and picking at leaf clusters near the ends



Scarlet Tanager

of twigs. Sometimes they make short flights to catch flying insects, particularly bees and wasps. They eat caterpillars, moths, adult and larval beetles, dragonflies, aphids, snails, spiders, worms and millipedes. During cold snaps they land on the ground and hunt for beetles, earthworms and other terrestrial prey. They also eat tender buds, wild fruits and berries, and cultivated fruits such as cherries.

Scarlet tanagers nest in late May and June. To rear a brood, a pair needs at least four wooded acres, with eight the optimum. During courtship the male flies to a perch below the female; he droops his wings and spreads his tail to show off his brilliant back. If the female strays outside his territory, he chases her back into it. Tanagers mate frequently, with the female crouching and calling to entice the male. She chooses the nest site and builds the nest herself, over three to seven days, while the male sings from perches at the mid-forest level. Tanagers nest lower than they forage; nests are 8 to 75 feet up (usually 18 to 50 feet), often near the end of a horizontal branch in an oak, with a view of the ground and with clear flyways from nearby trees. The nest is flattish and rather flimsy, made of twigs and rootlets and lined with grasses and stems; some nests are so loosely woven that the eggs can be seen from beneath. The female lays two to five eggs, usually four; they are pale blue-green marked with brown.

The female incubates them for about two weeks, with the male bringing food to her. Both parents feed insects and fruit to the young, which leave the nest after

9 to 15 days; their parents keep feeding them for two more weeks. Only one brood is produced each summer.

Fledglings are brown, with slight streaking. In late summer the adults molt, and for a while the male is a patchwork of red, yellow and green; he ends up looking like the female, but retains his black wings and tail. Scarlet tanagers leave Pennsylvania in September and early October.

They migrate mainly through the Caribbean lowlands of Middle America and spend most of the year east of the Andes in remote forests of Colombia, Ecuador, Peru and Bolivia. There they sometimes join mixed-species flocks and feed in the canopy (along with other tanagers) and in fruiting trees.

One scarlet tanager that had been banded lived for ten years; most, however, probably don't survive for half that long. They're preyed on by hawks, falcons and owls. Tanagers attack squirrels and blue jays, which, nevertheless, manage to rifle many nests. Crows also eat eggs and fledglings. Brown-headed cowbirds parasitize more than half of all tanager nests in some areas, particularly where the forest has been fragmented by logging or home development. Scarlet tanagers nest statewide in Pennsylvania and are more common than many people

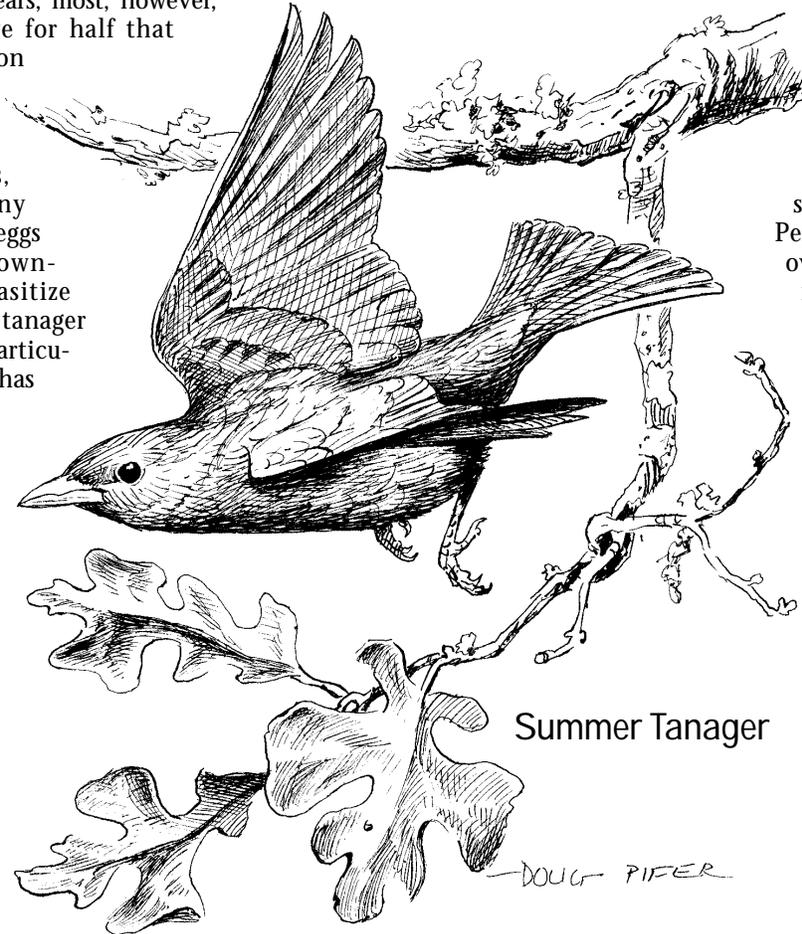
think. The highest populations occur in mature, extensive forests. Scarlet tanagers are absent from treeless urban areas and intensively farmed lands.

Summer Tanager (*Piranga rubra*) — This all-red tanager breeds mainly in the Southeastern U.S., where it is called the "summer redbird." Its range extends into southwestern Pennsylvania, and it is regularly found only in Greene County. *Breeding Bird Atlas* volunteers found it during the 1980s in Greene, Washington and Beaver counties. Summer tanagers inhabit dry upland forests, with a preference for slightly open oak woods. In summer they eat mainly insects: caterpillars, moths, beetles, cicadas, grasshoppers, flies and others; often they tear open wasp nests to feed on larvae, apparently without

being stung. The summer tanager's breeding and nesting habits are similar to those of the scarlet tanager.

Some individuals seen in springtime in Pennsylvania may have overshot their normal range and may then turn around and move back south to find mates.

Summer tanagers spend most of the year on a large range that extends from central Mexico to Bolivia and Brazil.



Summer Tanager

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