

Mecklenburg Audubon Society

Species Notes: Tanagers

Summer Tanagers and Summer NOT

"I saw a red bird in my yard and it's not a Cardinal, what is it?" That's a frequent spring question from my colleagues at work. Most people know what a Cardinal looks like even if they aren't avid birders. And most of them are stunned when they spot a red bird that is not what they expected. Especially if it is a Scarlet Tanager!

There are 241 species of tanagers which only occur in the Western Hemisphere. All of them are brightly colored birds, with most living mainly in the tropics. Four species venture into North America during our spring and summer. But only two species of tanagers can be found in our area. One, the Summer Tanager (*Piranga rubra* [pie-RANG-gah RUBE-rah]), will nest in the piedmont but the other, the Scarlet Tanager (*Piranga olivacea* [pie-RANG-gah ol-ih-VAY-see-ah]), moves on north and/or west into the Carolina mountains. In fact the scarlet tanager has the longest migration of all the tanagers. They winter as far south as the Amazon basin and breed in the northern conifer forests of Canada.

Both species are about the size of a robin but sit more horizontally on a perch. They have heavy slightly down

curved bills. The males during the breeding season are bright red. The scarlet male has black wings and tail but the summer is all red. The females are much duller with a olive green back and pale yellow under-parts. To further confuse the beginning birder, in the fall the males molt out of their bright colors to look like the females. If you happen to see a male in molt in late August or early September he will really look weird with patches of green, yellow and red. Also first year male Summer Tanagers also look like the female. So not all yellow tanagers are necessarily females!

Even though these birds are brightly colored they are not easy to see. They move slowly and deliberately through the tree tops in search of insects especially caterpillars and larva. They both like mature oak/pine forests but the summer seems to like the lower, warmer latitudes and altitudes. In the Carolinas it breeds on the piedmont and coastal plains. The scarlet is a bird of more northern altitudes/latitudes so it is usually found in the Carolina mountains. During migration both can be found in Mecklenburg County. Where their ranges do over lap they are very aggressive towards each other. In fact the first time I saw either of these birds was shortly after I



Summer Tanager

moved here. I went to Morrow Mountain State Park and observed the two species in a vocal duel.

More often than not you will hear the birds before you see them. The songs of both birds are similar to a Robin. The scarlet's song is a little more hoarser. Some describe it as a robin with a cold. The summer's song on the other hand is a little more sweeter. Neither are as complex as the robins' song.

Although it may be difficult to pick out the subtle differences in their songs, their calls are dramatically different and unique. In fact once you learn their call notes you can identify the bird without ever seeing it! The scarlet's call note is a simple 'chip-burr'. Usually loud and emphatic. The summer's call is often said to sound like a dripping faucet. It is a staccato - 'picky-tucky-tuck'. Once you hear these in the woods you will never forget them.

One last thing of interest about the summer tanager. In some areas it is called the 'bee bird' because it loves to eat bees and wasps. Often it will actually fly out and 'hawk' the insects like a flycatcher. They especially like to raid the nests of wasps for larva. Ring wasps are one of their favorites. Those are the wasps that like to build nest under the eaves of you house!

So the next time you see a flash of red in your garden or hear a dripping facet look up and search the tree tops for these beautiful creatures.



Scarlet Tanager - Male & Female

