Scarlet Tanager

Drs. Foster & Smith Educational Staff

Thoreau once said that the Scarlet Tanager, "…flies through the green foliage as if it would ignite the leaves." The name Tanager means any small brightly colored bird and comes from the language of the Tupi Indians of the Amazon region. Oddly enough the plumage of the male and female birds are very similar during their winters in South America. Both are generally an olive green color with dark wings and tail, it's not until their spring migration north that the breeding plumage of the male scarlet tanager turns bright red with jet-black wings and tail.

Photo courtesy of Jerry Kumery

Interesting Facts:

Family: Thraupidae

Scientific Name: *Piranga olivacea*

Location: Scarlet Tanagers can be found in the east-central United States and southeastern Canada during the spring and summer months and in northwestern South America in the winter. They prefer the upper canopy of trees whether in the tropical forests of South America or deciduous forests and pine-oak woodlands of North America..

Migration: The winter range of this tanager is not clearly known. Its primary habitat is middle-elevation forests in the northwestern Andes, but may also be found in the Amazon lowlands. The spring migratory route follows a path along the western Gulf of Mexico up into the United States. Birds first appear in the U.S. in late March and are generally seen in larger numbers by mid-April. Their migration usually follows the development of foliage in the deciduous forests, as they prefer areas with well-developed canopies.

Nesting: These tanagers prefer to nest in deciduous woodlands 8 to 75 feet above the ground. The female builds a loose cup nest of twigs and grasses well out on a limb. There she incubates 3-5 green eggs with brown speckles, which will hatch in about 2 weeks. Both parents care for the young who leave the nest in another 2 weeks. Only one brood is raised each season.

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Diet:	Scarlet Tanagers prefer to stay among the tree top canopy where they forage for insects such as weevils, wood borers, leaf beetles, cicadas, dragonflies, ants, termites, gypsy moth caterpillars, wasps, and bees. They will also dine on the occasional mulberry, June-berry, and other wild berries and fruit. During cold wet weather in early spring they may seek their prey on the ground.
Size and Color:	These birds range from 6-1/2" to 7-1/2" long with a wingspan of 11 to 12 inches. The breeding plumage of the male is bright scarlet with jet-black wings and tail. Females and juvenile birds are greenish yellow with darker wings. Each fall the male sheds his striking scarlet colors and becomes an olive color with black wings and tail, similar to the female.
Song:	4 or 5 short phrases hurry-worry-flurry-blurry (like a hoarse robin). Alarm call *chip-burr*.
Special Characteristics:	• Despite the bright coloring of the male these shy birds can actually be very difficult to spot as they are most often found in the upper canopy of trees, silently searching for food. • Males can be heard caroling, *queer-it, queeer, queer-it*, and will often sing on lower branches during mating season to show off their stunning red back to the female above. • Females are rarely noticed except when giving the alarm call *chip-burr*. • Weights range from 21.5 to 42.5 grams.
Attracting:	Scarlet Tanagers are attracted to water and will visit garden pools and birdbaths to drink and bathe. In early spring you may be able to attract them with suet cakes made of cornmeal, peanut butter and beef at feeders. Another option is to invest in a variety of canopy trees that provide the habitat these, and other birds crave. Some recommended hardwoods are oak, hickory, maples, and wild cherry.
Life Span:	Oldest known Scarlet Tanager in the wild - 10 years, 1 month.

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