

Further Evidence for the Breeding of the Summer Tanager in Canada

by

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The Summer Tanager (*Piranga rubra*) is considered to be rare in Canada, with casual records from southern Manitoba and southwestern Quebec (Godfrey 1986). It occurs more frequently in southern New Brunswick, Nova Scotia, and Ontario. In Ontario it has recently been recorded annually during spring migration at various localities along the north shore of Lake Erie. At Point Pelee National Park, Essex Co., for example, an average of 7.2 birds were observed in spring for the years 1978–87, inclusive (Wormington 1978, 1979, 1980, 1981, 1982, 1984; Runtz 1983; Pratt and Pratt 1985; Hince 1986; Pratt 1987). During this period the earliest date noted was April 20 and the latest was May 27.

At Rondeau Provincial Park, Kent Co., about 50km east of Point Pelee, the park records indicate that only one or two Summer Tanagers are recorded in an average spring migration. In addition, there is a record of two males being collected by the late J. L. Baillie on 12 June 1933 and one June record in 1965 (Speirs 1985). These were the only summer records for Rondeau until 1985, and two of the very few for

Ontario. Only one other "summer" record occurred during the five years of the Ontario Breeding Bird Atlas project, that being in 1983 when a singing male was recorded in late May at the Royal Botanical Gardens in Hamilton, Regional Municipality of Hamilton-Wentworth (Woodliffe 1987). The spring of 1985 saw a minor influx of Summer Tanagers at Rondeau, involving at least five different birds from 1–9 May. Two of the five birds were females. There was a lull in observations until 26 May when a male and female were noted in the park's sighting book as being seen along the South Point Trail. There were no further records until 8 July, when Dr. Richard Knapton excitedly reported observing a pair along the South Point Trail. They seemed to be intent on one certain area, and copulation had been observed. I checked the area on 9 July and saw no sign of either the male or female. However, early in the morning of 10 July, I again checked the location. Within two minutes of my arrival, what I identified as a male Summer Tanager appeared approximately 15m up in a nearby American beech (*Fagus grandifolia*) tree. It was giving

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an alarm call which can best be described as a distinct "tic-tucketytuk". These calls are well recorded on both the Peterson and National Geographic tape guides to bird songs. The bird I saw was about 15–18cm long and an almost uniform rich rosy but dull red. The wings were much the same colour, but perhaps slightly dusker towards the tips. The bill was fairly stout and yellowish. The bird worked its way to within 20m of me, all the while giving its alarm note. I hid behind a nearby tree trunk, hoping to keep an eye on the bird to follow it to its mate. The bird flew back to the beech tree and then out of sight beyond it. It could not relocate it. I left the area intending to come back in a few days, thinking that if the bird was nesting, it may be quite early in the cycle and, therefore, I did not want to disturb it. The habitat consisted of a mature beech-maple woods, with numerous basswood (*Tilia americana*), white ash (*Fraxinus americana*), and tulip-tree (*Liriodendron tulipifera*) present as well. A few of the mature trees had fallen over in recent years, making the overstory relatively open. The South Point Trail and nearby slough made it seem even more open.

On 16 July I checked the area again and heard but did not see the bird. On 22 July I saw the male with food in his mouth and heard him giving alarm calls. He flew to a tree where the female was, fed her and then they both flew off away from me. Although I examined this tree and nearby ones quite thoroughly, I

could not find a nest. I again checked the area for two hours in the early evening of that same day, but saw no sign of either bird. I checked the area on four subsequent occasions from 23–29 July but neither saw nor heard anything of the Summer Tanagers. Then, on the morning of 30 July, I heard the male call twice, the last time I found any concrete evidence of either tanager being in the area. It is possible that because of the absence of other Summer Tanagers in the area at the time, the male did not feel compelled to call and "defend" the territory with any regularity. As a result, the birds may have been more difficult to detect. Farrand (1983) states that this species "often remains concealed in higher vegetation, especially when breeding."

On 15 November I found a tanager type nest that Phil Taylor had mentioned to me a few weeks earlier. It was approximately 180m south of the area where the pair had been most frequently seen. It was in a sugar maple (*Acer saccharum*) tree, approximately 10m up and 4m out from the trunk in the crook of a misshapen, bent branch about 2–3cm in diameter and almost directly over the road. It was neat, circular, and flat-shaped, approximately 10cm in outside diameter and appeared to be comprised of coarse grasses and weed stems. Small branches and the presence of leaves protruding from the limb supporting the nest would have likely obscured the view from below. The nest was not that of any thrush, vireo, or warbler species that

I am familiar with. If this was in fact the location of the Summer Tanager's nest, its distance (180m) from the scene of all the observations described above may partially explain the infrequency of activity noted.

There is no conclusive evidence that this pair of Summer Tanagers bred at Rondeau Provincial Park in 1985. Activities such as copulation, male feeding the female, alarm calls, and length of time the birds were noted in one area — together with the presence of suitable habitat and the finding of an unoccupied tanager-like nest in the vicinity — all suggest that these birds did indeed breed or at least attempt to breed at Rondeau. However, based on this account, the status of the Summer Tanager in Ontario and Canada continues to be that of an occasional visitor and suspected breeding resident.

In future, field ornithologists should make a concerted effort to determine if pairs do establish subsequent to the occurrence of spring "overshoots", in the hope of adding the Summer Tanager to the list of breeding birds in Ontario and Canada.

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