

SCARLET TANAGERS BREEDING ALONG THE CHATTAHOOCHEE RIVER IN COBB AND FULTON COUNTIES — The Scarlet Tanager (*Piranga olivacea*) is a well-known and fairly common breeding summer resident in the mountains and upper Piedmont regions of Georgia, nesting mostly between 550 and 1350 m (Beaton, G., P.W. Sykes, Jr., and J.W. Parrish, Jr., 2003, Annotated Checklist of Georgia Birds, GOS, Occasional Publ. No. 14). The species nests locally in the middle and lower Piedmont, and reports from this area of single birds or pairs during the nesting season are always notable. Thus, a series of sightings totaling up to 20 individuals found at 4 different locations along the Chattahoochee River in the metro Atlanta area in spring and summer of 2008 and 2009 was surprising.

On 19 June 2008, at the Island Ford Unit of the Chattahoochee River National Recreation Area (CRNRA), a singing Scarlet Tanager was detected and then glimpsed as it changed perches high in the forest canopy over the foot trail. A second individual was later heard singing 3-4 times, this time much further from the trail and in the opposite direction of the previous bird.

On 1 July 2008, on hilly terrain at the Gold Branch Unit of the CRNRA in Cobb County, the song and call note of a Scarlet Tanager was again detected. The trail followed the contour of a knoll to form a large loop between the high ground and a slough that is part of Bull Sluice Lake. Across the slough to the north a second Scarlet Tanager was also singing. Later, along the eastern side of the knoll and up the steep slope, a third tanager was singing at intervals of 30-90 seconds, much like the previous 2 birds. Approximately 500 m up this trail a fourth Scarlet Tanager was singing, but this time it was much closer and obviously not in the canopy. A male with slightly worn plumage was observed in the mid-story, actively foraging. The bird worked its way along small branches, tilting its head to look underneath leaves for invertebrates. The bird sang sporadically, perhaps every 1-2 minutes, as it foraged. The bird captured some unseen prey item, after which it flew to a dense area of branches and leaves in the canopy. Other movement in the area revealed a female Scarlet Tanager, also foraging. After capturing a prey item near the ground, the female flew to a higher branch in the mid-story, and closer inspection proved the prey to be a very large, bright green katydid. She proceeded to strike the insect against the branch several times, and at the same time removed all of its legs and wings. She then gripped the abdomen firmly in her bill, and flew directly to the same area in the canopy where the male had delivered food earlier. The canopy was examined as closely as possible, but the likely nest was not located. The presence of a paired male and female along with foraging behavior and frequent food deliveries are very strong indicators of an active nest.

On 3 July 2008, at the Jones Bridge Unit of the CRNRA, another Scarlet Tanager was singing, from the direction of a power line right-of-way. A search detected a female Scarlet Tanager feeding on the fruits of a black cherry tree. A male Scarlet Tanager soon entered the same tree before both birds flew off together.

The following spring, on 16 May 2009, a return trip to the Jones Bridge Unit produced 4 singing Scarlet Tanagers. Two of these male birds were confirmed visually. One was observed for 3-4 minutes as it foraged in the mid-story of a tree. During this time, the bird hover-gleaned a portion of the tree that contained many spider webs. Soon afterwards, the bird flew uphill, where he began to sing at a higher frequency than when he was foraging.

On 12 July 2009, many Scarlet Tanagers were again heard singing and calling along the Chattahoochee River, this time southwest of Atlanta near Campbellton in Fulton County (Giff Beaton, pers. comm.).

All of these observations occurred at elevations of 275-300 m, which is substantially lower than the previously mentioned average for nesting Scarlet Tanagers in Georgia. Nearly all observations were made on the highest ground at the CRNRA properties, though these were only low ridges or knolls. All of these birds were located in areas of mixed forest dominated by large, relatively mature deciduous trees, including several species of oak and some hickory. But perhaps most interesting is that while the species is known to nest in small numbers in the Piedmont, such concentrations of likely breeding birds along a river corridor have not been previously documented. Could the species be a more common breeder in the Piedmont in riparian zones along major rivers? Or, is it simply that some of the largest, contiguous tracts of intact forest in the heavily-developed Atlanta-metro area exist along river corridors, providing sufficient habitat to support populations of nesting Scarlet Tanagers? More fieldwork is needed to determine if the Scarlet Tanager is an annual summer resident at other CRNRA units along the Chattahoochee River in the metro Atlanta area, and along the river south of the city as well.

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