

AN OBSERVATION OF A SUMMER TANAGER ATTEMPTING TO EAT AN *ANOLIS* LIZARD

DAVID A. ABORN

*Department of Biological Sciences
University of Southern Mississippi
Hattiesburg, Mississippi 39406-5018 USA*

DANIEL FROEHLICH

*205 Moore Street
Princeton, New Jersey 08540 USA*

Abstract.—A Summer Tanager (*Piranga rubra*) was observed attempting to eat an anole (*Anolis carolinensis*) at a migratory stopover site. The event may reflect the importance of behavioral plasticity during migration, but might also be the result of a simple stimulus-response mechanism.

OBSERVACIÓN DE UN INDIVIDUO DE *PIRANGA RUBRA* INTENTANDO COMERSE A UN LAGARTIJO (*ANOLIS* SP.)

Sinopsis.—Se observó a un individuo de *Piranga rubra* intentando comerse a un individuo de *Anolis carolinensis* en uno de los lugares de estadía durante la migración. El evento puede reflejar la importancia de plasticidad en la conducta de alimentación de las aves durante la migración, pero además puede ser el resultado de un simple mecanismo de estímulo-respuesta.

Tanagers (Family: Emberizidae) eat insects, fruit and nectar (Isler and Isler 1987, Snow and Snow 1971). The available information on the diet of Summer Tanagers (*Piranga rubra*) indicates that they eat a variety of insects and fruit during both the breeding and non-breeding season (Bent 1958, Isler and Isler 1987). On 3 Apr. 1993, we observed a radical departure from this diet. The event took place on Horn Island, a barrier island off the coast of Mississippi (30°14'N, 88°40'W; see Moore et al. 1990 for description). We had been radio-tracking an ASY male Summer Tanager as part of ongoing research to determine habitat assessment by migrants during stopover. At 1402 hours CST, the bird dropped to the ground in scrub/shrub habitat, out of sight, after having been perched for the previous 20 min. We resighted the bird after about 4 min. It was perched about 0.5 m off the ground eating a green anole (*Anolis carolinensis*). The tanager had the anole's head in its bill, and the anole's tail was missing. The bird appeared to mash the anole's head with its bill and then attempt to swallow the lizard whole. This sequence was repeated six times. After 20 min, the tanager dropped the anole and flew to another perch. We went to the spot where the anole was dropped and collected it. The tail had been bitten off near the base and presumably eaten, although we never observed its consumption. The head had been badly mutilated. The anole measured 8 cm snout-vent length. Prior to taking the anole, the tanager had eaten only insects, mostly butterflies.

DISCUSSION

Although there are records of Scarlet Tanagers (*Piranga olivacea*) eating slugs, snails, and annelid worms (Prescott 1965), we believe this to be the first record of a tanager, or at least a Summer Tanager, capturing vertebrate prey. Assuming the tanager ate the anole's tail and was attempting to consume the rest of the body, this departure from its typical diet may reflect a dietary plasticity needed to meet the energy demands during migration (Greenberg 1990, Moore 1991). This might be especially important following trans-Gulf flight (Loria and Moore 1990, Moore and Kerlinger 1987). Although insects and fruit may provide ample nutrients to replenish depleted fat stores, efforts to supplement the diet unconventionally may be an attempt to compensate for unpredictable parameters (e.g., habitat suitability, prey density) of stopover areas. The length of time the tanager spent attempting to swallow the anole suggests that it was a high value resource. If this hypothesis is true, then the event reinforces the importance of stopover areas for enabling birds to meet the energy demands of migration.

An alternative explanation might be that the tanager was simply responding to the stimulus of a moving potential food item that turned out to be too difficult to swallow. If the anole had the properties of the tanager's search image (e.g., it had the right size, color, movement pattern), then consuming the anole was within its normal feeding behavior, and the concept of behavioral plasticity may not apply.

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