

THE PRACTICED EYE

Notes on female tanagers

Kenn Kaufman

Photographs by Barth Schorre

from VIREO



Summer Tanager. Photo: Barth Schorre/VIREO (s08/11/151).

IT WOULD BE REASONABLE TO SAY that the most “typical” tanagers are members of the genus *Tangara*, nearly fifty species of bright multi-colored avian gems. In *Tangara*, the sexes usually look the same, young birds seem to attain adult plumage fairly quickly, and the brilliant color patterns generally rule out any kinds of problems in field identification.

However, *Tangara* tanagers (like most other tanagers) inhabit the deep tropics. North of the Mexican border, the breeding tanagers belong to the genus *Piranga*, and in this group the sexes are colored differently. Adult males are bright and distinctive enough to spark the interest of the beginning birder, while sorting out the females can provide mental exercise for the more experienced observer.

Widespread across the southern United States, the Summer Tanager (*Piranga rubra*) is the most uniformly colored of our tanagers: unmarked rose-red in the male, unmarked golden yellow in the female. The overall color of females may vary from brownish-yellow to bright, even with orange or reddish



Summer Tanager. Photo: Barth Schorre/VIREO (s08/11/152).



Scarlet Tanager. Photo: Barth Schorre/VIREO (s08/11/172).



Scarlet Tanager. Photo: Barth Schorre/VIREO (s08/11/171).

tinges on some, but the warm tones are always dominant. Seen in good light, a female Summer Tanager will never look strongly greenish.

The female Scarlet Tanager (*Piranga olivacea*) is also relatively plain, lacking strong contrast. In a reflection of the black wings that are the trademark of the male Scarlet, the female's wings are also subtly darker than the rest of the plumage. But it can be very tricky to separate female-plumaged Scarlet and Summer tanagers by the darkness of their wings alone. Overall color of the

body plumage creates a more useful first impression: Scarlet Tanager looks more generally green. Its back looks more olive-green (in Summer Tanager the back tends toward olive-brown or olive-gray), and its underparts are more yellow-green (lacking the mustard-colored or ochre tones of Summer Tanager). With a close look at the wings, the female Scarlet tends to look more uniformly dark on the coverts: dark brown with a variable green wash, but with no obvious pale edges; the female Summer usually has yellow tips or edges on the

coverts, unless the plumage is in very worn condition.

Bill size is an excellent field mark, especially in bad light where color differences may be questionable. The bill of Scarlet Tanager is visibly shorter than that of Summer Tanager. The Scarlet also usually has pale yellow lores (often, but not always, slightly darkened in Summer Tanager), and, in combination with the smaller bill, this creates a noticeably different facial expression.

Scarlet Tanagers start to get complicated in late summer. Adults of our tanager species all go through a complete molt before migrating south; but while the winter and summer plumages are essentially identical in Summer Tanager, the adult male Scarlet Tanager puts on a winter plumage in which all the red is replaced by olive-green. So the assortment of greenish Scarlet Tanagers seen in fall includes some that are typical adult females, some with black wings (adult males), some having dark wings with black feathers mixed in (first-autumn males), and some with a more dusky-green tone to the body plumage (first-autumn females).

It would seem that the Western Tanager (*Piranga ludoviciana*) would always be easily separated from the others by the fact that it has wing-bars. Generally, this is true. But as Tom Davis pointed out years ago in this journal (*American Birds* 26:713–714, August 1972), Scarlet Tanagers in their first autumn can show wing-bars, sometimes quite noticeably. So in identifying a Western Tanager out of range, it is important to look for other things besides the simple presence or absence of wing-bars.

In terms of shape, Western and Scarlet tanagers are quite similar; both are smaller-billed than Summer Tanager. Western also tends to have greenish tones, like the Scarlet, although often paler. However, the upper back (between the wings) is strongly washed with gray in the female Western Tanager, contrasting with the more greenish nape and rump. On the female Scarlet the back is only slightly grayer than the nape, and there is no distinct line of contrast separating the two areas. The color of the underparts is variable, but Western may look grayish on the flanks and whitish on the belly more often than Scarlet Tanager does.

Not pictured here is Hepatic Tanager (*Piranga flava*), a specialty of the southwestern mountains. The female is quite similar to the female Summer Tanager,

although the Hepatic shows a gray patch on the ear-coverts and a gray wash on the sides. In parts of the Southwest, a briefly-seen female Summer/Hepatic type may have to be dismissed as a question mark.

However, this problem—and other identification problems involving our tanagers—can be quickly solved if the bird happens to call. Unlike the *Tangara* tanagers of the tropics, which are mostly insipid and uninteresting vocally, all our *Piranga* tanagers have robust voices. Their callnotes, heard at all seasons, are distinctive: a musical *chip* or *chip-burr* in Scarlet Tanager, a crackling *pickituck* in Summer Tanager, a lighter rising *prididit* in Western Tanager, and a low *chuck* in Hepatic Tanager. As in so many other cases, the practiced eye can be aided substantially by a perceptive ear.



Western Tanager. Photo: Barth Schorre/VIREO (s08/11/175).

A note on the photographs: Barth Schorre has had exposure in this column before, but this time he has a monopoly. Based in the Houston area, Schorre does much of his photography by setting up his blind in front of choice watering spots when spring migration is passing through the Upper Texas Coast. This strategy has made it possible for him to put hundreds of photos into the VIREO collection, representing a high percentage of all the migratory songbirds of eastern North America. The quality of Schorre's portraits gives an indication of what can be done with technical skill and a little patience.



Western Tanager. Photo: Barth Schorre/VIREO (s08/11/178).

VIREO (Visual Resources for Ornithology), at the Academy of Natural Sciences of Philadelphia, is the world's first and foremost scientifically-curated collection of bird photographs. Established in 1979, the collection now holds more than 100,000 images, representing well over one-third of the world's bird species. For more background, see the feature on VIREO by J. P. Myers *et al.* in *American Birds* Volume 38, Number 3, May–June 1984.