

Summer Tanager *Piranga rubra*



Folk Name: Redbird, Bee Bird, Summer Redbird

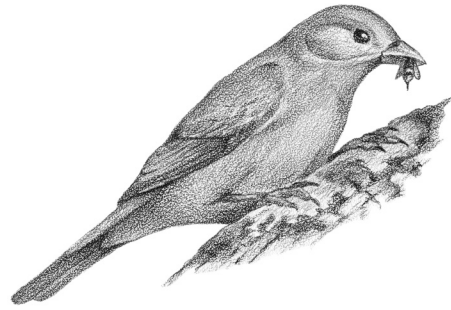
Status: Breeder

Abundance: Fairly Common to Common

Habitat: Open dry pine or mixed hardwood forests, wooded residential areas

The Summer Tanager is the first of our three species of tanagers, each of which is classified in the genus *Piranga*. At 7 ¾ inches long, this “Summer Redbird” is the largest of the three. Adult males are entirely an orange-red or rosy-red color, and they have a stout, pale-yellowish bill. Females are generally mustard to gold in color. Young males are a mix of these colors until their second fall. The male’s song sounds a bit like an American Robin song, but its call is a distinctive *picky-tucky-tuck* or *pit-eh-kuh, kuh*. This bird is a neotropical migrant that breeds throughout the southern and southeastern United States and winters from central Mexico south to Peru, Brazil, and Bolivia.

The Summer Tanager is the more common of our two breeding tanagers. It is found nesting in open woodlands and in wooded residential areas throughout the Carolina Piedmont—primarily below 2,000 feet in elevation. It will nest in any wooded habitat, but in some areas it appears to have a preference for open pine forests. This bird generally stays with us for about 6 months of the year. Our earliest spring arrival date is 7 April, and our latest fall departure date is 7 November in 1983 when Albert Conway sighted a Summer Tanager that he considered “3 weeks late” in Rock Hill. Our highest single day tally on a Spring Bird Count was a total of 30 birds counted in May 1970. We have one record of this tanager here during the winter months. In 2011, Vivian Sprehe reported a female Summer Tanager visiting her feeder in Charlotte from late January through at least 8 March. This bird was



photographed and observed by several birders.

In 1879 in Chester County, Leverett Loomis wrote: “although a woodland bird, the summer tanager is by no means strictly confined to the timber, but, on the contrary, is found in the groves and shade-trees of the town, and around the planters’ houses in the open country, and is everywhere an incessant songster. During spring the woods are filled, at all hours of the day, with the fervid melody of this tireless vocalist.” Loomis collected an adult female along with her nest with three eggs and sent the set to Thomas Mayo Brewer for study. Brewer later published full details of the eggs and nest in an ornithological journal. The nest had been built on the end of a 5-foot-long limb, 8 ½ feet up in a blackjack oak tree. Loomis collected another specimen on May 16, 1879, that is still housed today in the ornithological collection at Harvard.

In 1885, R.B. McLaughlin documented the first arrival of the Summer Tanager to Statesville on 20 April and on 11 April in 1889. Elmer Brown reported one present in Salisbury on May 5, 1923.

William McIlwaine reported seeing one in Charlotte on his daily walk on April 18, 1927, and a few weeks later



Summer Tanager.



Female Summer Tanager on 1 May.

on 16 May, he discovered a Summer Tanager's nest. This characteristically "flimsy" nest was built on a horizontal limb about 18 feet up. The bird was sitting on eggs and McIlwaine wrote: "The bird sits close. She did not fly when I hit on the tree or in the boughs below her." On April 23, 1928, he remarked: "You can always find a pair of these birds in season in the woods immediately behind the home of Mr. R.M. Pound on Dilworth Road. They nested there last year and will probably do so again this season." On May 22, 1928, he wrote: "A summer tanager has his home just off the dirt road in Latta Park. Tanagers are partial to the ends of oak branches." He found the nest "in a white oak about 25 ft. up far out on a limb, and on top like the nest of a robin. But it was not well built"

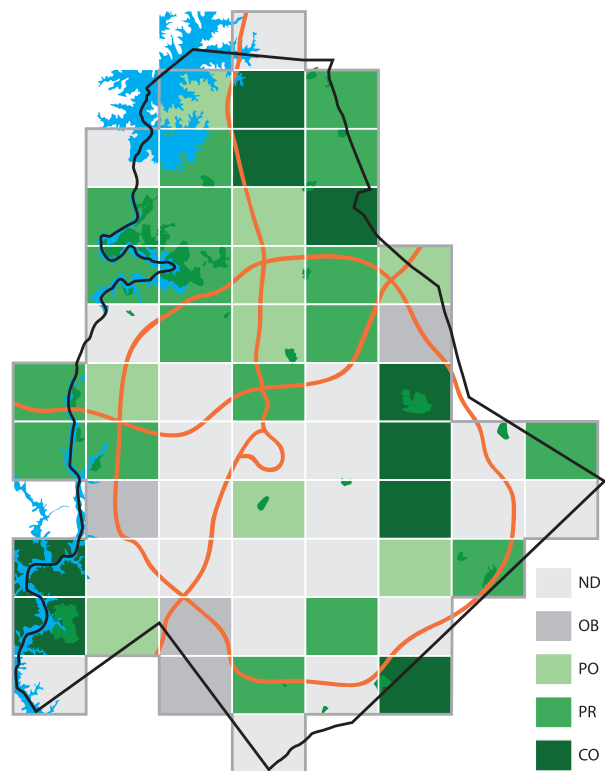
Sarah Nooe captured an "off-color" female Summer Tanager that had flown in the window of the science building on the campus of Queens College in Charlotte on May 10, 1951. It had a "very yellow" bill and a yellow spot on top its head and had a "bright orange" tail. She released the bird and saw it again 3 days later and provided this account: "She flew to a piece of scaffolding on the Myers Park Baptist Church and tugged unsuccessfully at some rags tied around a beam. The next morning I saw the female tanager flying in the same area, and on the 27th, a pair was there. I watched the female gathering spider webs in her bill and thought she had begun constructing a nest in a willow oak. The next day I looked for a nest but could not find it."

On January 3, 1953, Rhett Chamberlain wrote the following account of the song of the Summer Tanager in the Town of Matthews:

The song of the Summer Tanager will be as easily remembered as the call notes if we once give it attention. It is really a very simple song. There are five different syllable groups, uttered in deliberate bursts, and repeated over and over with only a brief pause and practically no variation. First there are 2 closely-coupled syllables, then 2 more, then 4, then 2, and 1. Word associations are usually poor but they do serve as memory aids. Here they are as I hear them on Critter Hill: ker-chief, block-head, bring-it-up-here, stup-id, here; ker-chief, block-head, and on and on. And that is all there is to it. Unlike the song of the Hermit Thrush, the order seldom changes. In the early hours of the day when

there is little to distract the singer, I have heard the song repeated 147 times with scarcely a pause. Sometimes the series is incomplete but almost always it starts with "ker-chief." The few exceptions that I have heard to this have come at daybreak during the tuning-up stage. The "words" are uttered at approximately one-second intervals.

Last summer I clocked the call of a Summer Tanager fledgling. The bird had left its nest and spent a night and the greater part of 2 days on the same limb of a small cedar within 20 feet of my window. It was fed frequently by the mother but that operation only served temporarily to interrupt a loud and harsh two-syllabled chur-lee, repeated again and again at a fairly constant rate of 24 to 27 calls per minute. Listen for the Summer Tanager's song this spring and add it to your life-list of songs.



Mecklenburg County Breeding Bird Atlas:

Fairly Widespread (PR/18, CO/9)