

## Scarlet Tanager *Piranga olivacea*



**Folk Name:** Black-winged Redbird, Piney-woods Redbird

**Status:** Breeder

**Abundance:** Uncommon to Fairly Common

**Habitat:** Mature, deciduous forests often in uplands

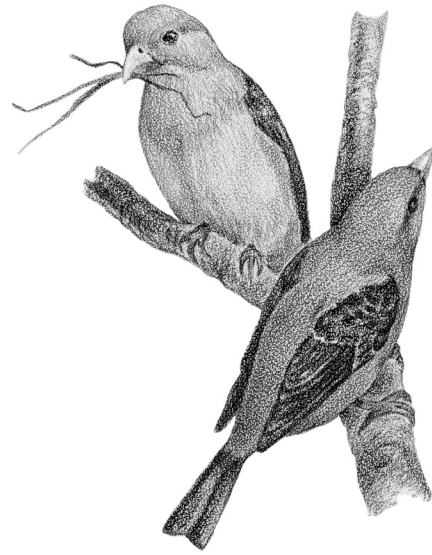
The Scarlet Tanager is the smallest of our three tanagers averaging only about 7 inches in length. It is also considered to be the most beautiful. The male Scarlet Tanager is a truly remarkable sight to behold. Its flame-red body and jet-black wing and tail colors combine to make it one of our most striking birds. In *Our Bird Book*, the adopted science text for North Carolina's elementary students in the early 1900s, A.C. Webb dubbed this bird "The Torchbearer" and provided this description and brief poem for students to learn:

The Scarlet Tanager, as his name indicates, is the brightest redbird we have. It would, in fact, be impossible to paint a brighter red than is seen in the plumage of this bird. The feathers on the body of the full plumaged male are so red that the bird looks like a flame of fire among the dark green summer leaves. The wings and tail are glossy black...

Sir Tanager, we're glad you're here,  
At this moist season of the year,  
For now your scarlet cloak is seen  
'Mong the leaves and branches fresh and green.  
Were you to come in autumn days  
In your bright plumage all ablaze,  
When leaves are crisp and branches drier,  
We fear you'd set the woods afire!

The Scarlet Tanager is a neotropical migrant that returns from its wintering grounds in South America, Central America, and southern Mexico each spring to its breeding grounds in mature deciduous forests in the mountains and Piedmont of both Carolinas. Some have been found to nest on the edge of the Inner Coastal Plain in both states as well.

Most arrive in late April or early May, and most have left this region by the end of October. Our early and late extreme dates are 9 April and 10 November. This lingering November bird was very unusual and was found by a group of 16 birders on a walk with the Mecklenburg Audubon Society in Huntingtowne Farms Park in Charlotte in 2005. We have no records of Scarlet Tanagers present in the Central Carolinas during the months of December through March. Our peak one-day count is a tally of 35 birds recorded on a Charlotte Spring Bird Count in 1978.



J F M A M J J A S O N D

The breeding range of the Scarlet Tanager has changed in both states over the past century. During the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, this bird was known only to breed in the mountains of the Carolinas. Beginning in the 1920s, reports indicated this tanager was slowly expanding its breeding range eastward into the Piedmont. The timing of this expansion may have been tied to the collapse of the cotton industry and the regrowth of Piedmont deciduous forests. By the early 1970s, the Scarlet Tanager was breeding throughout the Piedmont and into the upper northwest Coastal Plain of North Carolina. In South Carolina, the Scarlet Tanager was first confirmed nesting in the Piedmont in the 1950s, and by the 1990s, it had been found nesting throughout the Piedmont and in the Coastal Plain as far east as Darlington County.

Elmer Brown provided the first breeding evidence of the Scarlet Tanager in the Central Carolinas in a letter he wrote to C.S. Brimley at the North Carolina Museum on August 28, 1926:

We have come to the conclusion that the Scarlet Tanager breeds to a small extent in at least part of the central portion of the State, as well as in the mountains. At Davidson, Mecklenburg County, in 1925 I saw a male Scarlet Tanager almost continuously from May 10 till May 25, which was just a day or two before I left school there. At Davidson on June 25, 1926, Frank saw a male Scarlet Tanager with food in his bill fooling around a young tanager, though he did not actually see it do the feeding.

In May 1928, William McIlwaine wrote:

Of course Latta Park has its tanagers. But tanager headquarters for the City of Charlotte are down around Briarwood Road, and in the trees beyond, in the yards of the Reas and the Rankins and others. Vireos too are numerous there. In Rankin's Woods, down by the creek, I saw an exquisite scarlet tanager and an adult orchard oriole, both males.

On September 5, 1929, he wrote: "Mrs. Frank Pegram tells me that a pair of scarlet tanagers has had a nest this summer somewhere close to their house on Providence Road. That there have been seen 2 in evidence all the summer, and that they are still there."

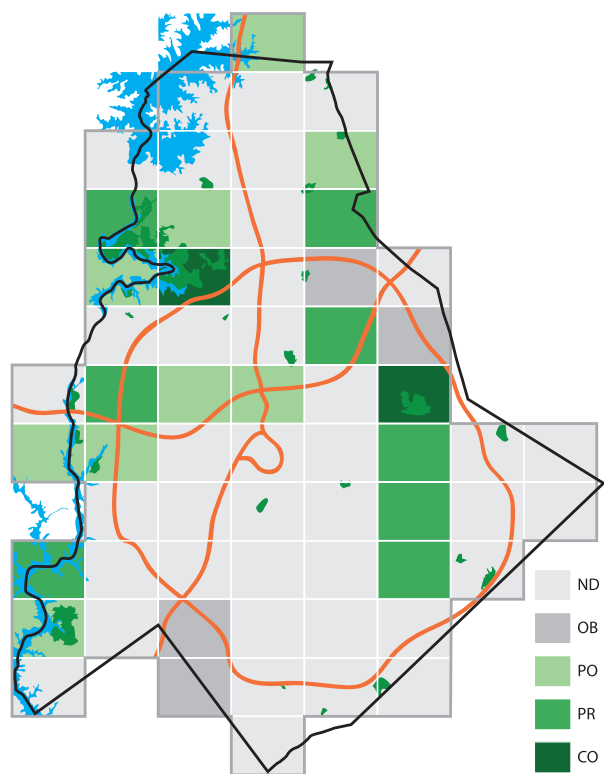
Ornithologist Doug McNair reported finding "a few" during breeding season in both Anson and Richmond counties in 1981. Robin Carter had two singing males along Flat Creek in eastern Lancaster County on June 23, 1987. In June 1989, Carter found a singing male near Leeds in Chester County and another along the Broad River in Union County, SC. Pete Worthington reported two singing males and a female in northern Laurens County on June 16, 1990. Lex Glover found a singing male at Flat Creek northeast of Kershaw, SC, on June 19, 1991. Kevin Hennings discovered a nest 7 miles



Male Scarlet Tanager. (Will Stuart)

northwest of the town of Fort Lawn in Chester County on June 30, 1991. Bill Hilton Jr. banded an immature female at Hilton Pond in York County on July 12, 1992. This bird was probably raised somewhere in the surrounding region. Kevin Hennings found breeding Scarlet Tanagers in Richmond County on June 2, 1993.

Data collected during the Mecklenburg County Breeding Bird Atlas indicate a breeding code of confirmed or probable in 6 to 10 survey blocks for this species in the county. It was therefore designated as a "vulnerable" breeding bird in the county. Much of the moist mature deciduous forest habitat that this bird prefers has been eliminated in this rapidly urbanizing area.



### Mecklenburg County Breeding Bird Atlas:

Somewhat Local (PR/8, CO/2)