

## Western Tanager *Piranga ludoviciana*



**Folk Name:** (none)

**Status:** Winter Visitor

**Abundance:** Very Rare

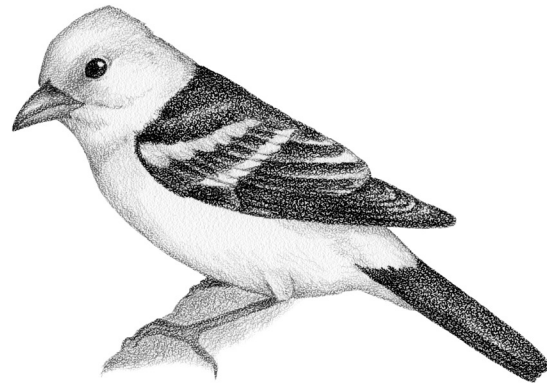
**Habitat:** Residential bird feeders

The Western Tanager is the most colorful of our three tanagers. It is a bird that breeds in western North America and is a rare but regular visitor that usually pops up somewhere in the Carolinas each winter. Breeding males are a mix of colors with red on their head, yellow on much of their body, and black on their back, wings, and tail. They have a bright yellow wing bar, a yellow nape, and a yellow rump. The male loses most of his rosy-red head color during the winter. Females are gray-green and greenish-yellow above and yellow-green below. Most Western Tanagers found in this region have been found visiting bird feeders.

The earliest report of a Western Tanager in the state of North Carolina was of a pair reported by W.G. Templeton of Statesville in June 1944. They were found in the mountain town of Waynesville. This report was not published until 1947 when Templeton belatedly recounted his sighting, writing: "My wife and I had quite a thrill seeing a pair of Western Tanagers in North Carolina." Unfortunately, this report included no details and should have been questioned as there were two birds and June is the time when this species should have been breeding in the western states. The sighting was published in *The Chat* and was later included by David Wray in the 1959 edition of *Birds of North Carolina*. W.G. Templeton was recognized as a local authority on birds in Iredell County, although by today's standards, this report would not be considered as valid for a first state record.



*Western Tanager in Charlotte yard. (Barry Rowan)*



In February 1957, an acceptable report was published from Mattamuskeet Wildlife Refuge, and in March 1957, another corroborated report was submitted from a feeder in Fayetteville. The first Western Tanager reported in South Carolina was found at Bull's Island on December 27, 1954, and the second was reported in Charleston in May 1957. Since these first state records, more than 100 sightings have been reported in the Carolinas, mostly from the Coastal Plain.

Julian Meadows and his friend H. Lee Jones were the first to discover a Western Tanager in the Central Carolina region. They were both about 14 years old at the time and lived in a residential neighborhood near downtown Charlotte. Jones later shared this account:

On the morning of 11 November 1959, he [Meadows] called me all excited and said he had a Western Tanager at his feeder. I figured he must be mistaken but I nevertheless, dropped everything and rushed over to his house just in case he was right. Sure enough, it was a male Western Tanager. It was not listed in Pearson, Brimley, and Brimley's *Birds of North Carolina*, so we congratulated ourselves on getting the first state record.

Jones was disappointed when he later learned there had been three reports of Western Tanager in the state by the time he and Meadows had seen their bird. Though never officially published, Meadows and Jones' report of their Western Tanager in Charlotte would have been regarded at the time as the fourth sight record of this bird in the state of North Carolina.

Fifteen years later, Jay Carter sighted an adult male Western Tanager in the Sandhills Game Lands in Richmond County on August 10, 1974. Twenty-five

years later on January 16, 1999, Steve Tracy found a male Western Tanager at his backyard bird feeder in Gastonia. Tracy was participating in a Project FeederWatch count at the time. Duane Crane later verified this sighting. Tracy's report provided the last sighting of this species around the Central Carolinas in the twentieth century.

There have been eight sightings of Western Tanager around this region since the turn of the twenty-first century. An adult male Western Tanager dropped by the feeder of Mary Buckle in Mecklenburg County in mid-December 2003, and remained there through early February 2004. Buckle graciously opened her home to visitors, and the bird was seen and photographed by many. M.K. Morrison reported finding one at a feeder in Albemarle in Stanly County from 7 March to 11 March in 2004. An immature male Western Tanager showed

up at the feeder of Kelly Adkins in York County during late February 2006, and it lingered there until at least 12 March. Ron Clark reported finding a Western Tanager at Cowan's Ford Wildlife Refuge on October 20, 2006.

Ginger Walters hosted a Western Tanager at her feeders in Davidson, NC, on January 9, 2010. It stayed there for over a month. A sub-adult male Western Tanager was repeatedly seen feeding on dogwood berries at Lake James State Park from December 10, 2013, through at least January 8, 2014. Lee Weber and Jeff Lemons photographed a first-year male Western Tanager visiting a suet feeder off Appleberry Lane in Charlotte on March 13, 2014. Lastly, Barry Rowan spotted a male Western Tanager at his backyard bird feeders in Charlotte on November 26, 2016. This bird was in winter plumage.