

Wild Things in Your Woodlands

Scarlet Tanager (*Piranga olivacea*)



The scarlet tanager is a medium-sized songbird, about 7 inches in size. Strikingly beautiful, the male tanager is a brilliant scarlet red with solid black wings and tail. In contrast, the female tanager is olive green on the back, with a yellow underside and dark brown or black wings.

As warmer weather arrives and the trees begin to leaf out, many songbirds make their annual trek to the northeast to nest and raise their young. Having spent the winter in montane evergreen forests from Panama to northwestern South America, the tanager seeks out mature deciduous and mixed forests upon its return. The male tanager arrives first to set up territory.

This beautiful bird can be seen throughout New York State, especially in large forested areas. However, because tanagers spend most of their time high in the forest canopy, they can be difficult to pick out, despite the male's vividly colored plumage. A telltale sign of the tanager's presence is its hoarse, robin-like song and a characteristic call of "chip-bang", emanating from high in the treetops.

Tanagers usually nest in deciduous trees, building a shallow cup of twigs, grass, bark, and rootlets about 20 to 30 feet above ground. The nest is constructed on a horizontal limb, about halfway out from the trunk of the tree, and usually at the junction of two or more smaller branches. The tanager lays 1-6 eggs (usually 4) that are greenish blue in color with fine reddish specks. Eggs are incubated for 13-14 days prior to hatching. After hatching, the male helps to feed the young. To find enough food and successfully raise a brood of young, a pair of tanagers needs at least four wooded acres, with eight the optimum.

The tanager forages mostly by gleaning or hawking flying insects. When a bird is gleaning, it catches insects and other invertebrates by plucking them from within foliage, or sometimes from the ground. In contrast, a bird that is hawking will watch for prey from a suitable perch. When it spies potential prey, the bird will chase it and catch it in its

beak, then return to the perch. In addition to invertebrates, the tanager also eats buds and fruits.

Hawks and owls prey upon adult tanagers. Squirrels, crows, and blue jays will raid tanager nests, feeding on the eggs and young. Brown-headed cowbirds parasitize more than half of all tanager nests in some areas, particularly where the forest has been fragmented by development. Cowbirds are brood parasites that lay their eggs in the nests of other birds. When parasitism occurs, the adult host birds often raise the larger, more demanding cowbird young at the expense of their own.

The best way to provide habitat for the scarlet tanager is to maintain large, contiguous areas of forest habitat, and encourage wooded connections between smaller patches of forest. Encourage a healthy forest canopy with small gaps, allowing the sun to reach the forest floor, and promoting understory growth. This will create a forest with many layers of vegetation at different heights, which in turn provides feeding and nesting sites and abundant food. Retain a variety of tree species and encourage individual tree health to help create a healthy, resilient forest and benefit the scarlet tanager as well as other wildlife.

Kristi Sullivan coordinates the Conservation Education Program at Cornell's Arnot Forest. More information on managing habitat for wildlife, as well as upcoming educational programs at the Arnot Forest can be found by visiting the Arnot Conservation Education Program web site at www.arnotconservation.info

Scarlet Tanager (male) photo courtesy of
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