

# **The Status and Occurrence of Scarlet Tanager (*Piranga olivacea*) in British Columbia.**

**By Rick Toochin**

## **Introduction and Distribution**

The Scarlet Tanager (*Piranga olivacea*) is an eastern species found breeding in old-growth deciduous forests in Canada from southeastern Manitoba through southern Ontario, Quebec, New Brunswick and southern Nova Scotia (Beadle and Rising 2006). In the United States Scarlet Tanager breeds along and east of the Mississippi flood plain to the Atlantic coast in the northern part of its range and in the south from eastern Oklahoma across to northwest South Carolina and western North Carolina (Beadle and Rising 2006). The Scarlet Tanagers migration route keeps this species in both spring and fall to the east of the Mississippi River in the United States but as far west as central Texas (Beadle and Rising 2006). Scarlet Tanager is considered a rare vagrant species in the western states of North America past eastern Colorado (Beadle and Rising 2006). The bulk of all western records come from California which has 126 accepted records (Hamilton *et al.* 2007). The majority of the accepted records, 96 out of the 126, come from the fall migration period which occurs from September through December with the majority of these fall records peaking in the last half of October (Hamilton *et al.* 2007). There are also a small number of records from mid-May through mid-June (Hamilton *et al.* 2007). In Oregon there are 5 accepted records with one record occurring in the month of December (OFO 2012). Washington State doesn't have any accepted records. In British Columbia there are 7 records for Scarlet Tanager with the pattern of vagrancy reflecting that of California with all but one record occurring in the fall and winter (Toochin *et al.* 2013, Please see Table 1). There are even 2 accepted records for Alaska that are both spring records with first being at Barrow June 25, 1934 (Roberson 1980, West 2008) and the second from Cordova on May 7, 1977 (Gibson 1977). Though Scarlet Tanagers breed in the Maritimes they do not breed in Newfoundland where they are a rare annual vagrant each year (Beadle and Rising 2006). Scarlet Tanagers are long distance migrants with the entire population leaving North America and wintering in South America (Dunn and Alderfer 2011). The long migration every year means that Scarlet Tanagers are likely to be displaced by large weather events which could explain why they have turned up as fall vagrants in Iceland where there are 4 accepted records (Kolbeinsson and Gunnlaugur 2012) and in Europe where there are at least 8 accepted records all from the month of October (Lewington *et al.* 1992, Mullarney and Zetterstrom 2009). Scarlet Tanagers have also turned up as a vagrant in the fall on the Azores where there are 8 accepted records (Rodebrand 2012). As observer coverage and knowledge of migration timing increases in British Columbia, it is conceivable that more Scarlet Tanagers will be found in the Province in the future.

### **Identification and Similar Species**

The identification of Scarlet Tanager is covered by all standard field guides. While adult males are readily identifiable, female and immature birds should be checked for carefully by observers. In British Columbia this means carefully separating the less likely Scarlet Tanager from the more common Western Tanager. Adult male Scarlet Tanagers are one of nature's truly spectacularly colored birds. The adult male's flashy scarlet red color encompasses the entire bird from the head down the back to the rump (Dunn and Alderfer 2011). The scarlet red color is found on the birds face, throat, breast, and belly down to the under tail coverts (Sibley 2003). The wings, tail and the eyes are jet black in color (Dunn and Alderfer 2011). The bill is small, stubby shaped and gray in color (Sibley 2003). The adult female Scarlet Tanager is completely opposite on the color spectrum to the adult male. The adult female is olive –green in color from the crown of the head down the back to the rump (Beadle and Rising 2006). The face, throat, chest, belly, flanks and under tail coverts are a yellow to yellow-green color (Beadle and Rising 2006). The wings are a dark dull greenish color (Beadle and Rising 2006). In fall some females will show very faint thin wing bars (Beadle and Rising 2006, Sibley 2003). The tail on female Scarlet Tanagers is dark on the inner most tail feathers but greenish on the outer tail feathers (Dunn and Alderfer 2011). The eyes are black and the bill is small, stubby and pale (Dunn and Alderfer 2011). First summer male Scarlet Tanager is similar looking to the adult males in that the body and head are scarlet red in coloration (Dunn and Alderfer 2011, Sibley 2003). Where they differ is in the wings. First summer male Scarlet Tanagers have black medium and lesser coverts and tertials but have distinctly brownish colored secondaries and primaries with green edges to the feathers (Beadle and Rising 2006). Immature birds are similar to adult females because from the crown down the back to the rump the color is a solid olive-green color (Dunn and Alderfer 2011, Sibley 2003). The face, throat, chest, belly down to the under tail coverts is a pale yellow to yellow-green color (Dun and Alderfer 2011). This coloration can be variable in how light or dark the color can appear with some birds, like the bird in Williams Lake, having a darker chest and a lighter colored lower belly. The bill on immature birds is pale throughout the bill and doesn't show gray on the top on the upper mandible or any gray coloration that an adult male's bill would show (Beadle and Rising 2006). The important difference of immature birds to adult females is the wing pattern. On immature male birds the lesser and medium coverts are black which is lacking in female birds (Beadle and Rising 2006). This black continues across the upper scapulars and down the tertials which are dark centered but have light edges to the feathers (Beadle and Rising 2006). The secondary feathers on the wings are dark with olive-green edges (Beadle and Rising 2006). The primary feathers on the wing are blackish in color (Beadle and Rising 2006).

It is important to note that the occasional immature Scarlet Tanager has been documented with faint wing bars (Dunn and Alderfer 2011, Beadle and Rising 2006). This could pose a potential pitfall with trying to separate Western Tanager. In the east Summer Tanager is the species that must always be separated from Scarlet Tanager. In British Columbia Summer Tanager is just as rare as Scarlet Tanager so this isn't the common species that would have to be ruled out first. Western Tanager is the first species that should be ruled out as it is the common species of Tanager found across British Columbia. Western Tanager is considered to be closely related to Scarlet Tanager as they are similar in size and structure with Western Tanager being a bit larger in body size (Beadle and Rising 2006). As adult males Western Tanager is not similar looking to Scarlet Tanager at all. On adult male breeding plumaged Western Tanager the head is entirely red and extends down onto the upper throat (Dunn and Alderfer 2011). The lower neck and the entire breast down to the under tail coverts is yellow as is the rump (Sibley 2003). The back has a large black patch that separates the yellow of the neck from the rump (Sibley 2003). The wing is black but has two wing bars with the upper wing bar being yellow and the lower wing bar being white (Beadle and Rising 2006). The bill is large and pale in color except on the upper ridge of the upper mandible (Dunn and Alderfer 2011). The legs and feet are also dark in color (Dunn and Alderfer 2011). On adult male Western Tanager in winter plumage there is a light reddish coloration around the front of face with the head and neck being an olive-yellow color (Dunn and Alderfer 2011). The throat down to the under tail coverts are bright yellow as is the rump (Dunn and Alderfer 2011). The back is black with light mottled edges creating like the male a large black patch (Sibley 2003, Dunn and Alderfer 2011). The wings are also black in color with two wing bars where the upper wing bar is yellow and the lower wing bar is white (Beadle and Rising 2006). The tertial feathers are black with light white outer edges (Sibley 2003).

The head coloration is more subdued and it is important to note that these birds do not ever look like Scarlet Tanagers and identification should be straight-forward. Female plumages however are drabber in coloration and the fact there are two color morphs makes female Western Tanagers similar to Scarlet Tanager (Dunn and Alderfer 2011). Some female Western Tanagers have a gray breast and others are very yellow to yellow-green (Dunn and Alderfer 2011). No matter what the breast coloration all female Western Tanagers have bold pale wing bars (Beadle and Rising 2006). This and the gray back help differentiate Western Tanager females from female Scarlet Tanagers (Dunn and Alderfer 2011, Sibley 2003). The bill is larger and paler on Western Tanager to Scarlet Tanager (Dunn and Alderfer 2011). Though some immature Scarlet Tanagers can show faint wing bars it is important to note that they are never bold and as thick as any found on a Western Tanager (Beadle and Rising 2006). Another good field mark for distinguishing female Western and Scarlet Tanagers is the axillaries on the

underside of the wing (Sibley 2003). On Western Tanager they are yellow and on Scarlet Tanager they are white colored (Sibley 2003).

There are two other species of Tanager in North America that are similar to Scarlet Tanager. The first species is Summer Tanager which is found primarily in the southeast of the United States as a breeder but does have a western population that extends north from Mexico into Arizona and southern California (Beadle and Rising 2006, Dunn And Alderfer 2011) The second species is Hepatic Tanager which has a more limited breeding range in North American as it is found in Arizona and New Mexico (Dunn and Alderfer 2011). Summer tanager has occurred in British Columbia several times and any odd looking tanagers encountered should have this species ruled out. Summer Tanager is a larger bodied bird to Scarlet Tanager and has a large heavy pale bill (Sibley 2003). Adult males are easily distinguishable from Scarlet Tanagers by the entire bird is a bright rosy red color with a larger longer pale bill (Dunn and Alderfer 2011). Summer tanager female lacks dark wings and is entirely olive-green in color (Dunn and Alderfer 2011). An important behavioural difference is that Summer Tanager has the habit of cocking its tail when perched (Sibley 2003). The axillaries on the underside of the wing is yellowish-green in color help distinguish it from the white color found on Scarlet Tanager (Sibley 2003). No matter what the plumage Hepatic Tanager is a larger bodied bird with a large dark bill that has the appearance of a tooth or slight hook along the edge of the upper mandible (Dunn and Alderfer 2011). In early November of 2012 a male Hepatic Tanager was found and well photographed in Wadena Saskatchewan (Hedegard 2012). Though the chances of a Hepatic Tanager are remote to ever being found in British Columbia the recent Saskatchewan record should make observers become more aware of the possibility.

### **Occurrence and Documentation**

On December 16, 2012 a Scarlet Tanager was found by Marion Corless in Williams Lake. She was watching the birds in here yard because this was the day of the Williams Lake Christmas Bird Count. The bird was coming into her Mountain Ash Tree taking the berries off the tree to eat the nuts found inside the berries (P. Ranson Per. Comm.). Initially the bird was not identified and remained a mystery bird until it was confirmed and photographed by local birder Phil Ranson on December 19, 2012 (P. Ranson Per. Comm.). The bird remained in the same area until December 23, 2012 when it disappeared and likely perished due to the sub-zero temperatures (P. Ranson Per. Comm.). This Scarlet Tanager appears to be a 1<sup>st</sup> winter male based on the black lesser and medium coverts that are readily separable from the brownish-olive secondaries found on the wing (Beadle and Rising 2006). The bill on the Williams Lake Scarlet Tanager is all pale on both the upper and lower mandible lacking any dark gray on the top of the upper mandible which would make this bird an adult male (Beadle and Rising 2006, Sibley 2003). The red plumage is likely explained by the fact the bird is going through a partial First Prealternate molt that includes body plumage, inner greater coverts, some tertials and

some or all rectrices, this molt takes place in January through March, beginning on the wintering grounds (Beadle and Rising 2006). Though mid- December is early it is conceivable that the body start acquiring red feathers so close to January when Scarlet Tanager is known to start their first Prealternate molt (Beadle and Rising 2006). This incredible winter record is only the seventh record of this enigmatic eastern tanager to British Columbia.

Though the very first Provincial record is documented by a skin specimen, the rest of the records for British Columbia are sight records and one record with very poor quality photographs (Toochin *et al.* 2013, Please see Table 1). Since many excellent photographs were obtained of the William Lake bird that makes this the first properly photographed record for British Columbia. The pattern of vagrancy in British Columbia is just being established but based on the 7 records (Toochin *et al.* 2013, Please see Table 1) Scarlet Tanager is a fall vagrant to the Province with incredibly two winter sightings. The British Columbia records of Scarlet Tanager mirrors California's more established vagrancy pattern perfectly as a fall vagrant. The normal range of Scarlet Tanager keeps this species well east of the Rocky Mountains and explains why vagrant birds are scarce from Oregon to Alaska. The birds that have been found have been located in mostly deciduous forest habitat which mirrors the species preference out east. A bird found in Jordan River on September 20, 2007 was in Alder Trees in the loose company of a couple of Western Tanagers (Toochin 2012b). The two records from the Chilliwack area were birds loosely hanging out with Western Tanagers but were more on their own but were found in deciduous trees (Toochin 2012c). The other winter record for the Province comes from Vancouver and this was a single bird seen in the company of American Robins feeding on berries in a Mountain Ash Tree (Toochin 2012a). This is the exact behaviour that was witnessed with the Williams Lake bird. It is another good reason to check winter flocks of American Robins that heavily favour Mountain Ash berries in the winter. As with any vagrant species of passerine good places to look for this rare visitor in the Province would be any known coastal or interior vagrant trap sites. The best places to look is where geography and the habitat work together to cause the bird to stop and feed. Such a place is Cecile Green Park at the tip of the Point Grey Peninsula in Vancouver where a Scarlet Tanager has been reported.

It appears based on the records to date that birds that have been found in British Columbia can be either immatures or adults with records split in half but just favouring adults. Fall has been the predominant pattern of vagrancy in British Columbia but the spring window for eastern vagrants should be considered for future records well. The period between mid-May and mid-June has produced many eastern warbler records with similar ranges to Scarlet Tanager. It highly likely that there will be future records in this time frame as more observers are aware to check all Tanagers more carefully. For now the fall period of September through early December is the known period when Scarlet Tanagers can occur in the Province. With further

scrutiny of migrant flocks and careful study of Tanagers given by observers it is very likely there will be future sightings in British Columbia.



Figure 1: Scarlet Tanager in Williams Lake on December 20, 2012. Photo © Rita Proulx.

Figure 2: Scarlet Tanager 1<sup>st</sup> year male in Williams Lake on December 22, 2012.

Photo © Phil Ranson.



Figure 3: Scarlet Tanager 1<sup>st</sup> year male in Williams Lake on December 22, 2012.

Photos © Rod Sargent.

Figure 4: Scarlet Tanager 1<sup>st</sup> year male in Williams Lake on December 22, 2012.

Photos © Rod Sargent.

**Table 1: British Columbia Records of Scarlet Tanager**

- 1.(1) immature male November 17, 1926: Hamilton Laing (specimen: RBCM 13912) Comox (Laing 1932, Campbell *et al.* 2001)
- 2.(1) 1<sup>st</sup> fall male December 1, 1999: Golo Mauer: Cecil Green Park, UBC, Vancouver (Toochin 2012a)
- 3.(1) adult male July 30-August 1, 2005: Pam Dicer, and other observers: 321 Salal Road, Bowen Island (Cecile 2005, Toochin 2012a)

- 4.(1) fall male September 13, 2006: Jason Osterhold, Gordie Gadsden (photo) Island 22, Chilliwack (Toochin 2012c)
- 5.(1) adult male August 8, 2007: Gordie Gadsden: Cheam Lake, Chilliwack (Toochin 2012c)
- 6.(1) fall plumage male September 20, 2007: Rick Toochin: Jordan River (Toochin 2012b)
- 7.(1) 1<sup>st</sup> winter male December 16-23, 2012: Marion Corless, and other observers: (photo) Terra Ridge, Williams Lake (P. Ranson Pers. Comm.)

### **Acknowledgements**

I would like to thank Phil Ranson for his help in sharing both photographs and information on the William Lake observation of a Scarlet Tanager. I would like to thank both Rita Proulx and Rod Sargent for sharing their photographs of the Scarlet Tanager for inclusion in this article. I would also like to thank Brian and Rose Klinkenberg for reviewing and editing the manuscript of this article. All photographs are used with permission of the owners and are protected here by copyright law.

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