

## Scarlet tanager

### *Piranga olivacea*

Every spring and fall the banks along the Chicago River system are alive with activity as hundreds of thousands of migratory birds pass through the Chicago region - heading north for summer nesting grounds or south for wintering grounds.

Among the most striking in the springtime is the colorful male scarlet tanager, with a dark-red body set off by jet-black wings and tail. It is among the most blindingly gorgeous birds in our area. Males are generally found high in the forest canopy singing their songs and harder to spot yellowish-green, dark-winged females are found in the undergrowth. In the fall, the males' feathers become yellow-green as well.

Although they pass through the Chicago metropolitan region, scarlet tanagers prefer to nest in the connected stands of mature deciduous/coniferous forests of eastern North America. When breeding in the spring and summer, they will seek out larger deeper woods with bigger trees. At other times, they can be found in forest habitats as well as open spaces such as parks and gardens. Scarlet tanagers winter in mature forests and forest edges in the mountainous regions of northern and western South America. They range to the south as far as the Bolivian lowlands.

Scarlet tanagers are mainly insect eaters, but do also consume fruits and seeds. Their diet includes ants, moths, butterflies, beetles, flies, cicadas, leafhoppers, lice, termites, grasshoppers, locusts, dragonflies, dobsonflies, snails, earthworms, and spiders. They hunt high up in the tops of trees, along branches, vertically on tree trunks, and very occasionally on the ground. Scarlet tanagers are strong fliers, making swift, direct flights and migrating long distances in fall and spring. They sometimes hover to catch bees and wasps in flight.

Scarlet tanager populations have been stable during the last few decades. They only breed in large forests; however, and changes in land-use, forest fragmentation, and urbanization are responsible for the concerns about this species' future. We could see a rapid decline if their habitat disappears. An additional burden is the fact that sometimes tanagers nests are parasitized by brown-headed cowbirds, which destroy the tanager's eggs and replace them with their own which the tanagers then raise, never knowing the difference.

