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Birds of Barrington:

SCARLET TANAGER

ONE OF THE MORE STUNNING SPECIES that nests in the Barrington area is the Scarlet Tanager (*Piranga olivacea*). Even a momentary glimpse of the bird elicits a visual—and often audible—gasp. With black wings and tail, its body plumage is a luminous scarlet, not simply red, making even the eye-catching Northern Cardinal seem almost dull by comparison.

The tanagers have traveled far from wintering grounds in Northern and Western South America. They begin to arrive in early May, usually the males first, followed by the non-scarlet females a week or two later. No matter how many times I've seen them, the thrill of spotting a male Scarlet Tanager never diminishes. It's an instant visual jolt.

Tanagers belong to a colorful family, though those in the genus *Piranga* are now considered part of the Cardinal family. Many more species live in Central and South America. The continental U.S. hosts just four: the Scarlet, Summer, Hepatic, and Western Tanagers. Occasionally a Summer Tanager appears in the Barrington area, but mostly it is just the Scarlet Tanagers that make


their summer homes here.

When they first arrive, the males are loudly vocal. Their song is a two-note, raspy phrase repeated several times, sung usually from high in forests which is their preferred habitat. Often it is said to sound like a hoarse robin and that strikes me as a good description. As the season moves on, tanagers sing less. They make a two-note call, a less conspicuous dit-doing that I call their twang.

While I have been aware of tanagers active high in the oaks around our house, I have never seen a nest until a couple years ago. A sharp-eyed participant on a walk through the woods south of Penny Road Pond spotted a nest while the rest of us were ogling a pair of tanagers through binoculars and telescope. It was empty at the time and struck a number of us by its seeming flimsiness. When we returned later to look at it again, the incubating female filled all the spaces and made it look tighter.

She does not attract the attention her mate does and can be challenging to identify if you do not know how different the plumage of males is from that of females. She has dark wings and tail,

and otherwise is olive yellow and can blend quite easily into the background. It's important to note her thick tanager beak that is well suited for eating fruit and catching insects. I recall watching a Scarlet Tanager feast on bees in a tree in Central Park years ago. We watched it scrape each bee against the tree branch, apparently to rid it of its stinger.

The tanagers will raise only one brood this season. Sometimes, even often, the nest is parasitized by cowbirds, especially if it is situated close to the forest edge. But successful or not, the tanagers will retrace their flight path in late summer and early fall. We will need to wait another six or seven months to experience the tropical dazzle they bring to our region each spring. 

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PHOTO: LINDA M. BARRETT

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