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Birds of the Great Plains: Family Thraupidae (Tanagers)

Paul A. Johnsgard
University of Nebraska-Lincoln, pajohnsgard@gmail.com

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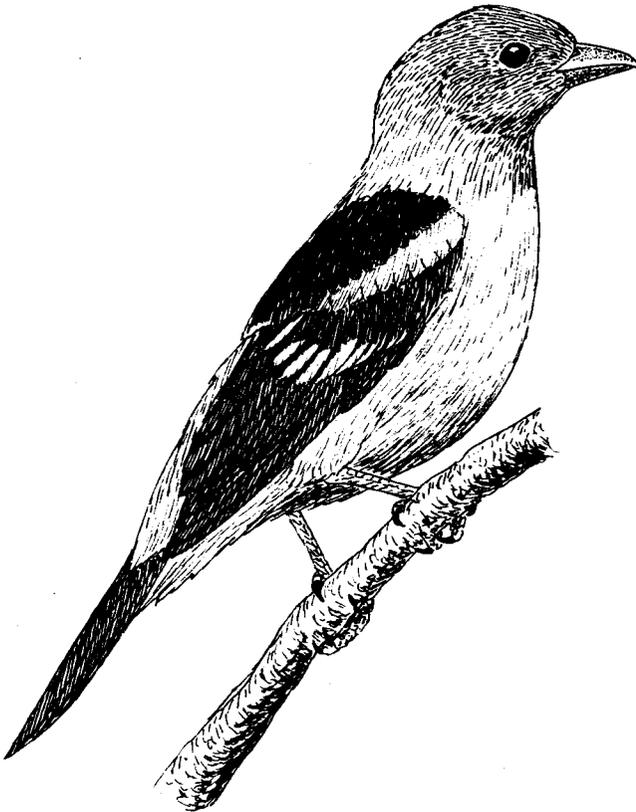
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FAMILY THRAUPIDAE
(TANAGERS)



Western Tanager

Western Tanager *Piranga ludoviciana*

Breeding Status: Mostly limited to the Black Hills of South Dakota, where it is a common resident. Also breeds uncommonly in the Pine Ridge area of northwestern Nebraska, possibly extending east in the Niobrara Valley far enough to come into contact with the scarlet tanager (*Nebraska Bird Review* 29:19).

Breeding Habitat: In the Black Hills and Pine Ridge areas this species is primarily associated with pine forests, and it secondarily uses deciduous woods along rivers or in gulches and canyons. In more mountainous country it extends higher, into the Douglas fir zone, inhabiting relatively dense and mature stands.

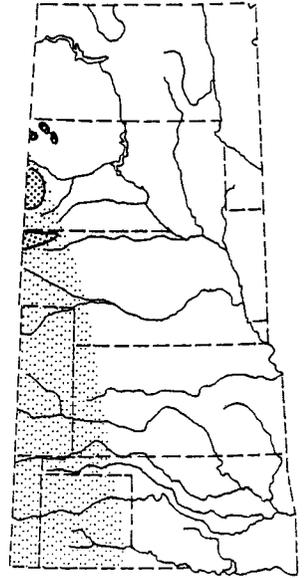
Nest Location: Nests are 6–50 feet above the ground, usually on horizontal branches of conifers, 3–20 feet out from the trunk. Infrequently, deciduous trees are used as nest sites. The nest is substantial but rather crude, constructed of twigs and rootlets lined with rootlets, hair, or other soft materials.

Clutch Size and Incubation Period: From 3 to 5 eggs. The eggs are pale bluish, with specks, spots, or blotches of brown, usually concentrated near the larger end. The incubation period is 13 days. Probably single-brooded.

Time of Breeding: In the Black Hills, breeding occurs during June and July, with eggs reported as early as June 10 and dependent fledglings seen as late as August 20.

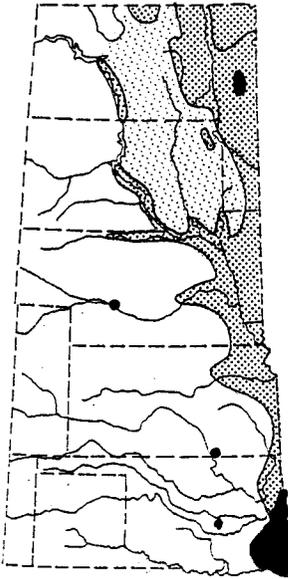
Breeding Biology: Surprisingly little has been written on the breeding biology of this beautiful species, but it presumably closely resembles that of the scarlet and summer tanagers. In spite of the bright coloration of the males, breeding pairs are not conspicuous, since the olive-colored female remains high in the trees, and they tend to be very elusive during nesting. The female incubates alone, and the male evidently rarely if ever approaches the nest during this period. After hatching, he does help feed the young, which probably fledge in about 2 weeks, judging from what is known of the other tanagers.

Suggested Reading: Bent 1958.



Scarlet Tanager *Piranga olivacea*

Breeding Status: Breeds locally in North Dakota (Pembina Hills, the Cheyenne, Red, and lower Missouri valleys, rarely the Turtle



Mountains), western Minnesota, eastern and central South Dakota, western Iowa, eastern Nebraska (west to Cherry County along the Niobrara River), northeastern Kansas (west at least to Clay County), northwestern Missouri, and eastern Oklahoma (west to Mayes and Pushmataha counties).

Breeding Habitat: In our region the species is restricted primarily to mature hardwood forests in river valleys, hill slopes, and valleys; it is less frequently found in coniferous forests and in city parks and orchards.

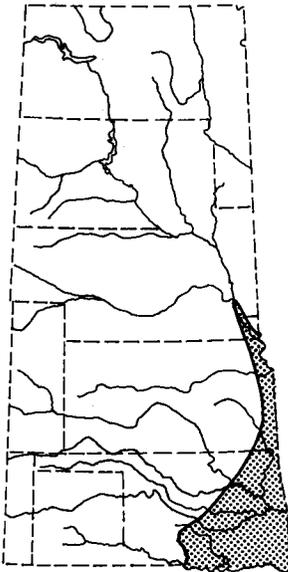
Nest Location: Nests are usually in tall trees, often oaks, 8-75 feet above the ground, but usually between 35 and 50 feet high, well out on horizontal limbs. The nest is rather small and loosely constructed of twigs and rootlets, lined with grasses and weed stems.

Clutch Size and Incubation Period: From 3 to 5 eggs, usually 4. The eggs are pale greenish or bluish, with brown specks, spots, or blotches, especially at the larger end. The incubation period is 13-14 days. Single-brooded.

Time of Breeding: In North Dakota, active nests have been found between mid-June and mid-July. Kansas egg records are from May 11 to June 20, and in Oklahoma active nests have been found in early June and early July.

Breeding Biology: The relatively late spring arrival of this species, combined with its typical foraging characteristics of remaining high in the canopy of mature trees, keeps most of its behavior obscured from normal view, much to the disappointment of bird watchers. Further, the nests are usually inaccessible for easy observation. It is known that the female incubates alone and in some cases the male participates very little even in feeding of the young. The young leave the nest in about 15 days and remain with their mother in the general vicinity of the nest for 10 days or more.

Suggested Reading: Bent 1953; Prescott 1965.



Summer Tanager *Piranga rubra*

Breeding Status: Breeds from the Missouri Valley of southeastern Nebraska (north to Sarpy County) southward through northwestern Missouri (uncommon at Squaw Creek N.W.R.), eastern Kansas (at least to Doniphan, Shawnee, and Montgomery counties), and the eastern half of Oklahoma (locally west to Cleveland and Comanche counties).

Breeding Habitat: The species habitat is not greatly different from that of the scarlet tanager, namely upland forests including hardwoods, mixed woods, and also open coniferous forests. It perhaps favors somewhat lower and more open forests than those used by scarlet tanagers, but at the northern edge of its range it is likewise limited to rich bottomland forests.

Nest Location: Nests are 10–35 feet above the ground, usually in deciduous trees such as oaks, placed well out from the trunk on horizontal branches. The nest strongly resembles that of the scarlet tanager, and the eggs are likewise very similar.

Clutch Size and Incubation Period: From 3 to 5 eggs, usually 4. The eggs are pale green to bluish, with brown specks, spots, and blotches that tend to be slightly heavier than those of the scarlet tanager. The incubation period is 11–12 days. Single-brooded.

Time of Breeding: Kansas egg records are from May 21 to July 20, with a peak of egg-laying around June 5. Oklahoma egg dates are from May 8 to July 17, and newly fledged young have been seen as late as early August.

Breeding Biology: A study of this species in northeastern Kansas indicated that territories were centered in areas of thick second-growth deciduous forest. The pair members seemed to remain in contact by uttering clicking notes, and in one case both usually stayed within an area of about 300 by 600 feet. The nest was built by the female, with the male standing guard, and required about 2 weeks. Incubation was by the female alone, but both sexes fed the young. At the age of only 1 week one brood left the nest, and the young fell to the ground. After another 3 days they were able to fly into nearby trees and were nearly feathered. They gradually moved away from the nest site but remained in the parents' territory for nearly 3 weeks more. A study in North Carolina indicated that courtship feeding of the female is probably an important part of this biology, since it seems to strengthen the pair bond and also probably prepares the male for feeding the young. In that study the young birds left the nest on the 9th or 10th day after hatching, and one of the young was singing a "primitive version" of the male's song when only 2 weeks old.

Suggested Reading: Potter 1973; Fitch and Fitch 1955.

