

The Outside Story



A Precious Stone with Wings By: Carolyn Lorié

One day last spring, I pulled into a parking lot in Thetford, Vermont, and saw a flash of brilliant red. Instantly, I knew it was a male scarlet tanager (*Piranga olivacea*). He was perched in a cluster of bushes and everything around him - the fresh spring leaves, a nearby robin, the recently revived grass - paled in comparison. Nothing could compete with his blaze of color.

This time of year, the male scarlet tanager has a ruby-red body, flanked by jet-black wings and an equally black tail. He's like a precious stone with wings. The female is olive yellow, with brighter yellow on her throat and face.

Less than two weeks after seeing the bird in the parking lot, I saw another scarlet tanager along a hiking trail in town. I thought perhaps the back-to-back sightings were a harbinger of more to come, but they weren't. Those two early-spring encounters turned out to be the sum total for the season. In my many years as a

backyard birder I have spotted scarlet tanagers only a handful of times, despite the fact they're relatively common.

These neotropical birds winter in South America and migrate across the Gulf of Mexico every spring to breed in the eastern half of the United States and parts of Canada. Males arrive first, and announce their presence with raspy song, similar to the courtship song of American robins. But unlike robins, they're unlikely to linger in your yard.

Once breeding season is in full swing, scarlet tanagers tend to spend most of their time high in the treetops. The females choose nesting sites that can be more than 50 feet from the ground. When searching for insects to eat, the birds tend to stick to tree branches and trunks at or near the top of the canopy.

Not only do scarlet tanagers tend to stay high up in the trees, they prefer to raise their young in large tracts of uninterrupted forest. A nest built on the forest edge is more likely to be parasitized by brown-headed cowbirds and is also more vulnerable to predators.

Large tracts of forest, however, aren't the birds' only requirement. They also prefer a diversity of trees. This is one of the reasons - in addition to the male's appealing looks - that a scarlet tanager appears on the syrup label for Audubon Vermont's Bird-Friendly Maple Project. Sugarbushes that contain only maple trees aren't as appealing to many songbird species, including scarlet tanagers, as more diverse sugarbushes. According to Steve Hagenbuch, a conservation biologist at Audubon Vermont, research suggests that insect foraging is not as good in maple monocultures. The presence of other tree species, especially red oak and hemlock, can increase feeding opportunities.

Not only does their habitat make scarlet tanagers hard to spot, but the males' flashy plumage fades in late summer with the onset of molt. By the end of September, the brilliant red feathers are replaced by dull yellow ones, similar to those of the female. So when the tree canopy thins, the males are no longer instantly identifiable.

This means that, outside of a syrup label, now is the best time to see the males in their full glory. Keep an eye out for them during their brief forays in shrubby areas and open spaces, and up in the canopy before the spring leaves obscure your view. They're singing their songs to attract a mate and, more importantly for us casual birders, are decked out in their rich scarlet feathers. You won't need a field guide to identify them - one glimpse and you'll know.

Carolyn Lorié lives in Post Mills, Vermont with her partner, Rick, and their three dogs. The illustration for this column was drawn by Adelaide Tyrol. The Outside Story is assigned and edited by Northern Woodlands magazine, www.northernwoodlands.org, and sponsored by the Wellborn Ecology Fund of New Hampshire Charitable Foundation: wellborn@nhcf.org.

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