

The 'Firebird' of Halton Forest

Scarlet Tanager (Piranga olivacea)



In his spring wedding wardrobe, the Scarlet Tanager is breath-takenly beautiful. Arguably, it is the most admired of southern song birds that come to nest in this north eastern breeding range, including the deciduous deep woods of Halton region.

Some call this exotic Neotropical beauty 'firebird', perhaps due to its plumage colouration during deliberate hops from perch or its fiery look in flight. Bright scarlet over most of the body with a contrasting black on wings and tail, the mature male in spring and early summer, is a glowing ball of fire. For those winter-ward birders in Halton region, Scarlet Tanagers re-appearance in mid-May and sighting it, is like a breath of fresh air.

Scarlets' arrival often coincides with the leafing out of trees in our area. The leaves give them cover and also ample insect food. Newly arrived male is focused first on establishing a territory. This is achieved by his far-carrying songs in the chosen area. To replenish the body depleted by the long northern migration from the forests of South America, he devours vast quantities of caterpillars, moths, beetles etc, from the foliage and bark. The female arrives little later to choose a prospective and most prodigious singer as her partner.

Blazing red, and yet, difficult to see, this Tanager. The irony is tied in with his most endearing trait to hide in the upper

canopy where he often stays to feed and to sing. Hence, this ventriloquist is more often heard than seen. If lucky, the subject will be pinpointed up there from his "chip-gurr" notes. Females also evade observation by perching higher than the male and also by her sober yellow below, green above plumage, which blends in with the colour of leaves of treetops.

The song of the firebird is rhythmic and cheery like that of the Robin's but hoarse and richer in quality. He pours out this sweet carol from a high perch. Roger Peterson compared Scarlet Tanager's song to that of a Robin's that has a sore throat. Another expert heard the Scarlet's 'Quiert queer, query, quiert, queer'.

In their love rituals, the male droops his wings with tail up; also his neck extends exposing his ravishingly brilliant colour to female who is looking just from an upper perch. Subsequently, she crouches down and flutters her wings to initiate mating. Sound signals are whistles 'chip-gurr' 'sweet' notes and full songs. Should he stop singing at this time of pair bonding or even after, she could wander away. In such a case, the spouse to be, will fly after her and force her back into his domain.

First week of June is the nesting time. Scarlets raise only one brood a year. Nest is a simple saucer on a horizontal branch of pine or oak tree. She collects stems, rootlets, grass and sticks from ground and incorpo-

rates into a nest. Unless feeding his mate with insects and berries in the nest or outside, the telltale male, wearing a dangerously conspicuous coat, often stays away.

Incubating three to five eggs is also done by female. But from nestlings stage to past fledglings phase, the male takes a much major role in their care and protection. He feeds them feverishly until they can lead an independent life of their own. Towards the end of July, the breeding season comes to an end. August: a sudden stillness in the woods. Male Scarlet's best days are behind him now. He is not at all in a cheery mood for re-starting the melodies. On the contrary, he stops singing altogether. The Scarlets have gone into seclusion and are in for a much physically taxing post-breeding complete moult. As writer Hue Halliday once put it 'a most melancholy month of the whole year for song birds', particularly with the Scarlet tanagers.

A Bird's Eye View

WITH RAM NAMBIAR

In the early stages of moulting, the male's once striking colour slowly fades into a mixture of dull scarlet and yellow. The female becomes shiny with orange and yellow. In late summer and fall when the moult is complete, however, the male has no traces of scarlet colour in him but in its place is a subdued olive yellow similar to that of the female which has an olive yellow and green. The wings and tail of male are black. Once a fiery personality, he has dramatically changed into an insignificant character with a retiring look. Now, the male, female and the young are hard to tell apart in their travelling dress.

In part of September and October, the Scarlets tanagers will be undertaking their long nocturnal migration south to their winter quarters of South America Flying south east from here over U.S mainland and Gulf of Mexico they will continue the journey deep south into Amazonian forest of Equador, Peru and Bolivia.

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