



# WESTERN CUYAHOGA AUDUBON SOCIETY

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## Feathered Flames in the Forest: The Scarlet Tanager

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Like an ornament on a tree the Scarlet Tanager perches showing off its bright fiery red-orange feathers. Contrasting black wings only highlight its brilliance. Most show a blazing red color but they are known to vary and sometimes are more orange.

It's difficult to miss unless it's perched high up in tall trees which this species does tend to favor. When its song is heard it can then be frustrating as admirers below try every conceivable angle to get a look at it. But often enough (well maybe not enough) the Scarlet Tanager appears curious of its human seekers and descends lower to the cheers of its fans.

I've only seen the greenish-yellow colored females a few times. But I can easily recall two of my first sightings of the eye-popping beauty of the male. One was on vacation in Michigan. Another was with my mentors in New Jersey. The Scarlet Tanager is widespread during the summer in most of the eastern U.S. and lower parts of Canada. Spending winters in northern South America it migrates through southern states to breed in deciduous and mixed deciduous-coniferous forests. See [allaboutbirds.org](http://allaboutbirds.org) for maps and other specifics.

Studying birdsong I found its short "chick-burr" call note easier to distinguish than its full song. The song is said to sound like a robin but with a hoarse or scratchy throat. Both can be helpful when it's not near enough to be obvious.

Its cousin the Summer Tanager is not as common to the north. Its breeding range includes southern states and also extends further west than the Scarlet Tanager. So these are quite a treat to see when

they show up in northern Ohio. And often it's a young first year bird that is seen in spring in its blotchy yet attractive mixed colors. The adult male is completely red. I've only seen a couple of this species. Most memorable was when one showed up in May at the newly opened Estuary Trail at the Magee Marsh Wildlife Area. Adult Summer Tanagers are often sought after in the Oak Openings region of north-western Ohio where they are more frequently spotted.

Occasionally Ohio gets a visit from a stray Western Tanager. In Ohio I've only seen a female Western and only once. But I vividly remember seeing my one and only male in California on the west side of Lake Tahoe about 25 years ago during a business trip. Males are multicolored yellow with black wings and a red head. The females are yellow-green with a dark back and wings. But its rump is greenish-yellow. Both display wing bars unlike the other tanagers. The female I saw visited feeders at a residence in Holmes County. It was a cold December day in 2016. But I was blessed by the gracious owners to be invited into their home to view this special visitor from their window and much closer to the feeders.

Whichever tanager we get to see can make a day outdoors one that will take a smile home.