

SCARLET Tanager NESTING IN NORTH-CENTRAL  
OKLAHOMA

BY MAXINE KASTL

In the summer of 1979 a pair of tanagers nested in my yard near Perkins, Payne County, north-central Oklahoma. My house is 3 miles north and half a mile east of town. It stands in fairly thick, mature oak woods well away from any highway. The male of the pair was a handsome, normally colored Scarlet Tanager (*Piranga olivacea*), while the female almost certainly was a Summer Tanager (*P. rubra*), a species known to nest regularly in the area. The buffy tinge throughout the yellow underparts of this bird was striking. The pair raised four young, three of them tanagers, one of which was banded and photographed in color on 18 July. The fourth member of the brood could, for all anyone really knows, have been a Brown-headed Cowbird (*Molothrus ater*).

I first saw the male parent tanager at about 1130 on 28 May, a warm, humid day. He dropped suddenly from an oak in my yard to the edge of a shallow bird-bath about 10 feet from me. Seemingly quite unafraid of me, he



A PAIR OF TANAGERS AND ONE OF THEIR BROOD

Photographed in the summer of 1979 near Perkins, north-central Oklahoma, by Wesley S. Isaacs, the male parent (a Scarlet Tanager) at left, on 6 July, and his mate (probably a Summer Tanager) and their recently fledged chick, on 18 July. Note the strongly buffy tinge on the underparts of the female parent, a feature that does not show in greater enlargements of the original photo.

drank, bathed briefly, returned to the oak, and flew off. When I next saw him, just before dusk on 16 June, a female tanager was with him. Both birds scolded as I walked along my driveway, convincing me that I had entered their nest territory. The scolding call of the male was so subdued that I made no special note of it; that of the female, on the other hand, was an incisive, almost strident, three-syllabled *the teacher* that occasionally was lengthened to a five-syllabled *the teacher gitcha*.

At about 0730 on 17 June I watched both birds as they moved about among dead branches in the lower part of oak trees near the house. Presently they went to the ground, where the female picked up and dropped slender twigs. I now suspect that she was after nest material, but I did not see her carry anything to the nest.

I continued to see and hear the pair near my house day after day. The male was remarkably confiding. He often allowed me — as well as groups of visitors — to approach him closely. His song I transcribed as a soft *sweet cheery, cha-weer, cha-weery*, sometimes uttered with beak closed. The female I did not often see clearly, though her outbursts of scolding told me that she was not far away.

On 7 July the behavior of the male changed noticeably. No longer was he calm and docile. Several times I saw him chasing another bird out of the yard. I felt sure that he was defending a nest, though I had no idea where the nest was. I now suspect that one or more of the eggs in it had hatched by 7 July.

On 13 July I saw the male take food directly to the nest, which was in a small post oak on a slim, almost horizontal branch about 12 feet out from the main trunk and about 15 feet from the ground. It was at a forking of the branch, well supported by twigs. I had walked right under it dozens of times. Indeed, it was only about 30 feet from my front door, but leafage surrounding it made it difficult to see.

Early in the morning on 15 July I could clearly see the beaks of four young birds protruding above the nest's rim. Both parent birds shared the task of feeding, though it seemed to me that the female made three times as many trips to the nest as the male did. So far as I could tell, the food that the old birds brought was insects exclusively.

Late that same morning I found one of the brood on the ground directly under the nest. Several members of the Payne County Audubon Society who had come to observe the tanagers also saw the baby bird. It was, in the opinion of Helen Miller (of Stillwater, Oklahoma) and of Deloris Isted (of Cushing, Oklahoma), about a week old. It was a pinfeathery, bare-bellied little thing, with tail about half an inch long. I put it in a small plastic bucket and hung the bucket well above-ground in the nest-tree. There was no way to hang the bucket directly under the nest, for there was no long branch under the one that supported the nest. Presently the mother bird began feeding the nestling. She usually delivered the food from the bucket's brim, but occasionally she hopped down into it. The father bird also carried food to the young bird in the bucket.

On 17 July the nestling left the bucket. It could not fly well on that date, but it was obviously strong and healthy. My daughter, Patti Muzny (of Oklahoma City), caught it, banded it, and put it on the branch that held the nest, 4 or 5 feet out from the tree's trunk. She also climbed the tree for a look down into the nest. What she saw there was two (not three) young tanagers, both of them at the point of jumping from the nest. Both were conspicuously large-billed. Patti made no attempt to catch the two for banding. She did not want them to leave the nest prematurely.

The following day the banded chick was well photographed in color by Wesley S. Isaacs and John S. Shackford of Oklahoma City. The nest was now empty.

The possibility that the missing chick was a cowbird cannot be dismissed as unthinkable. The fact that one young bird of the four was found on the ground long before any of the brood was capable of flight might well have roused my suspicion that something was amiss at the nest. Ejection of eggs and nestlings of the host species has been well documented for that well known avian social parasite of the Old World, the Common Cuckoo (*Cuculus canorus*). Indeed, a young Common Cuckoo in the very act of ejecting the egg of a Tree Pipit (*Anthus trivialis*) has been superbly photographed (see Welty, 1962, *The life of birds*, W. B. Saunders Co., Philadelphia & London, p. 311). No one, so far as I know, has photographed a young cowbird ejecting an egg or chick, but note what happened at the nest of an Indigo Bunting (*Passerina cyanea*) in southeastern Michigan in the summer of 1942: on 17 July of that year a nest holding four recently hatched chicks (three buntings and one cowbird) was found at the edge of a marsh; on 20 July there were two bunting chicks (only) and one cowbird chick in the nest and a third bunting chick, still alive, but very weak, was on the ground under the nest. Between that date and 22 July the other two bunting chicks disappeared, leaving one hale, hearty cowbird in the nest (see Sutton, 1956, *Jack-Pine Warbler*, 37: 97). It is conceivable that one or more adult female cowbirds were responsible for the disappearance of the bunting chicks, but the suspicion lingers that it was the chick cowbird itself that elimi-



#### THE SCARLET TANAGER'S MATE

Note the bigness of the bird's bill. Photographed by Wesley S. Isaacs near Perkins, Oklahoma on 18 July 1979.

nated its nestmates.

In the opinion of every person who saw and heard the parent tanagers, the female was a Summer Tanager. I had noticed the brightness of the bird's underparts the first time I had seen her. When Deloris Isted and Helen Miller saw her they pronounced her a "Summer" almost immediately. Among the careful bird students who saw her well—aside from those mentioned above—were Elizabeth Hayes and Hannah Bass of Tulsa and Carolyn Gritzmaker of Oklahoma City. Repeated attempts were made on 17 July to net the bird so that measurements could be taken, but all attempts failed.

The Scarlet Tanager breeds widely in wooded parts of the eastern third of Oklahoma. There is one valid record for its nesting as far west as Woodward County (1967, Audubon Field Notes, 21: 584). The late Zella Moorman — as well as others who saw the pair at that nest, which was along a road not far from Boiling Springs State Park — assumed quite naturally that the female bird was a Scarlet Tanager.

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## BREEDING OF BLACK-BILLED MAGPIE IN NORTHEASTERN OKLAHOMA

BY GARY W. SALLEE

On 17 June 1979, while banding nestling herons near Sapulpa, Creek County, northeastern Oklahoma, I found two dead young Black-billed Magpies (*Pica pica*) not far apart on the ground. The heronry was in a wooded area near a small tributary to the Arkansas River. The heron nests were in blackjack oak, hawthorn, hackberry, and persimmon trees, most of which were from 4 meters (14 feet) to 10 meters (35 feet) high.

Before entering the heronry that day, I had instructed my companions — Vicki Hatfield and my wife Sheryl — to listen and watch for Great-tailed Grackles (*Quiscalus mexicanus*), a species I had heard there on an earlier visit without being sure that it was nesting. While I was on my ladder at a heron nest, I saw on the ground, not far from the foot of the ladder, what I took to be two dead young grackles. These proved, however, to have bold white markings and feathered nostrils, features instantly declaring them to be magpies, a species I had seen much of while living in southeastern Colorado.

The two young birds were much alike, each being about 30 centimeters (12 inches) long, with tail-length of 10.8 centimeters (4¼ inches). The basal part of the major wing and tail feathers was sheathed for a considerable distance, indicating that the nestlings probably had died well before being able to fly. I guessed that they had been dead about five days. No nest in the immediate vicinity looked much like magpie nests I had seen in Colorado, but some high heron nests drooped over lower ones in such a way as to create a domed-over effect, and I suspect that the young magpies had occupied such a nest. Recent heavy rains may have damaged the structure, causing the nestlings to fall