

Status and Occurrence of Summer Tanager (*Piranga rubra*) in British Columbia.

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Introduction and Distribution

The Summer Tanager (*Piranga rubra*) is beautiful passerine found throughout the southern United States (Dunn and Alderfer 2011). This species breeds from southeastern California, southern Nevada, very rarely in Idaho, southwest Utah, central Arizona, central New Mexico, into southern Texas along the Gulf Coast, and southern Florida: also in central Texas, west-central Oklahoma, eastern Kansas, southeastern Nebraska, very rarely in South Dakota, southern Iowa, central Illinois (very rare in northern Illinois), southern Wisconsin, central Indiana, Ohio, southwestern Pennsylvania, West Virginia, Virginia, eastern Maryland, and New Jersey. In Mexico it is found breeding in northeastern Baja California, northern Sinaloa, northern Durango, southeastern Coahuila, and central Nuevo Leon (Beadle and Rising 2006). The Summer Tanager winters from southern Baja California, southern Sinaloa, and southern Tamaulipas south through Central America and South America (including Trinidad) to west of the Andes to southern Ecuador, and east of the Andes to northern Bolivia and Amazonian Brazil (Beadle and Rising 2006). This species is rare, but regular in southern California in the fall and winter, southern Arizona, Louisiana, southern Florida, the Bahamas and Cuba (Beadle and Rising 2006). The Summer Tanager is a vagrant to Hispaniola and the Lesser Antilles (Beadle and Rising 2006). This species is rare in the fall and a very rare spring vagrant in southern Quebec and Atlantic Canada (Beadle and Rising 2006). The Summer Tanager is casual in winter north to Michigan, southern Canada and Newfoundland, and North Dakota (Beadle and Rising 2006). This species is accidental in Britain with a record of a first-winter male that was present on Bardsey Island, Wales, from September 11–25, 1957 (Lewington *et al.* 1992).

Along the west coast, the Summer Tanager is a casual to rare species in Oregon with over eighteen state records accepted by the Oregon Bird Records Committee (OFO 2012). This species is accidental in Washington State with seven accepted records by the Washington Bird Records Committee (Wahl *et al.* 2005, WBRC 2014). In British Columbia, the Summer Tanager is an accidental species with only a few provincial records (Toochin *et al.* 2014, see Table 1).

There are 2 distinct subspecies of Summer Tanager found throughout their breeding range in North America (Dunn and Alderfer 2011, Robinson 2012). The western subspecies of Summer Tanager is (*P. r. cooperi*) which is found in riparian woodlands, especially those dominated by cottonwoods and willows from west Texas and the rest of Western North America (Dunn and Alderfer 2011, Robinson 2012). The eastern subspecies of Summer Tanager is also the nominate subspecies (*P. r. rubra*) which is found in deciduous or pine-oak woodlands, especially

woodlands with sparse understory from eastern Texas and the rest of Eastern North America (Dunn and Alderfer 2011, Robinson 2012).

Identification and Similar Species

The identification of the Summer Tanager is covered in all standard North American field guides. The Summer Tanager is a larger species measuring 20 cm in length with a wingspan of 30 cm, and weighs 29 grams (Sibley 2000). In comparison, the Western Tanager is slightly smaller and measures 18 cm with a wingspan of 29 cm, and weighs 28 grams (Sibley 2000). The Summer Tanager is a very obvious species in any plumage and should not be difficult to identify if observed well.

Adult males are entirely bright rosy-red (with western birds looking slightly duller) that is held year-round (Beadle and Rising 2006). There is a slight crest on the crown (Sibley 2000). The eyes are black and the bill is large and pale yellow (Sibley 2000). The legs are pale gray (Dunn and Alderfer 2011).

Adult females have a light pale bill, dark eyes with a mustard yellow face, throat, and breast to the undertail coverts (Lewington *et al.* 1992, Beadle and Rising 2006). The crown, neck, back, wings and tail are brownish-yellow-olive and unmarked. The rectrices and remiges, especially the outer primaries, often show brownish-red edges (Lewington *et al.* 1992). Some females, especially of the eastern race (*P. r. rubra*) show an overall reddish wash on the breast, belly, wings and tail. Western (*P. r. cooperi*) is larger overall, with larger bills—and is paler and has a grayer tone (Beadle and Rising 2006).

Juvenile birds show more brownish general colouration than adult female and are rather heavily streaked above and below with distinct pale double wing-bars (Lewington *et al.* 1992).

First winter males resemble the adult female, but the tertials are usually retained juvenile with rather distinct paler tips to the outer webs that are lacking in the adult. The tail feathers are obviously more pointed than the adults (Lewington *et al.* 1992).

First spring males hold this plumage from March to July (Sibley 2000). These birds are highly variable, but usually have red on the head and a varying amount of red on the wings and body (Sibley 2000, Dunn and Alderfer 2011).

The song of the Summer Tanager is robin-like with a staccato call “*ki-ti-tuck*” (Dunn and Alderfer 2011). The flight call is a soft, wheezy “*veedrr*” or “*verree*” (Sibley 2000).

Occurrence and Documentation

The Summer Tanager is an accidental vagrant to British Columbia with four records (Toochin *et al.* 2014, see Table 1). The first record was a first spring male found and photographed coming to the feeders of Mark Wall and Michele Humphrey at Blue River on May 7, 2009 (Toochin *et al.* 2014, see Table 1). Though there are sight records for the province prior to this sighting, this bird was well photographed (Toochin *et al.* 2014, see Table 1). The second record for the province was an adult male singing on territory by Doug Brown along the Bush River Forest Service Road on the way to Kinbasket Lake on June 11, 2009 (Toochin *et al.* 2014, see Table 1). The third record for British Columbia was found and photographed by El-Khahlafaw coming to his backyard feeders at 1572 Admiral Tryon Boulevard, Parksville from November 19-28, 2011 and was seen by many lucky observers throughout this period and was refound on January 26, 2012 (Toochin *et al.* 2014, see Table 1). The fourth record for the province was recently found and photographed by Linda Norman in New Denver from November 8-16, 2015 (L. Norman Pers. Comm.). A photograph can be viewed of this bird at <http://bcbirdalert.blogspot.ca/2015/12/nov-8-16-summer-tanager-in-new-denver.html>. There are four previous sightings involving three males and one female that could be valid, but details are lacking (Toochin *et al.* 2014, see Table 1). Records in British Columbia have not been broken down to subspecies, however, winter records in southern coastal California have been proven through skin specimen evidence to have been the eastern subspecies (*P. r. rubra*) even though the western subspecies (*P. r. cooperi*) breeds not far away in the eastern part of the state (Wahl *et al.* 2005). This shows that a record can't be assumed to either subspecies without solid evidence.

The spring records of Summer Tanager in British Columbia fall into the category of likely overshoots and the dates fall into the right timing with early May to mid-June as the time period (Roberson 1980). The records in Oregon and Washington State reflect the fall records in British Columbia with November appearing to be the best time period (Wahl *et al.* 2005, OFO 2012, Toochin *et al.* 2014, see Table 1). There are currently too few provincial records to establish defined patterns, but the four provincial records fit the overall west coast vagrancy pattern perfectly.

The Summer Tanager should be watched for by feeder watchers and keen observers alike as it is possible anywhere in British Columbia and is highly likely to occur again in the future.



Figure 1: Record #1: Summer Tanager 1st spring male at Blue River on May 7, 2009.
Photograph © Mark Wall and Michele Humphrey.



Figure 2: Record #1: Summer Tanager 1st spring male at Blue River on May 7, 2009.
Photograph © Mark Wall and Michele Humphrey.



Figure 3: Record #3: Summer Tanager female type at 1572 Admiral Tryon Boulevard, Parksville on November 19, 2011. Photograph © El-Khahlafaw.



Figure 4: Record #3: Summer Tanager female type at 1572 Admiral Tryon Boulevard, Parksville on November 19, 2011. Photograph © El-Khahlafaw.

Table 1: Records of Summer Tanager for British Columbia:

- 1.(1) 1st spring male May 7, 2009: Mark Wall and Michele Humphrey, mobs (photo) Blue River (Toochin *et al.* 2014)
- 2.(1) adult male June 11, 2009: Doug Brown: the Bush River FSR on the way to Kinbasket Lake (Toochin *et al.* 2014)
- 3.(1) immature/ female November 19-28, 2011: El-Khahlafaw, mobs (photo) 1572 Admiral Tryon Boulevard, Parksville (Toochin *et al.* 2014)
(1) immature/ female January 26, 2012: *fide* Neil Robins (photo) Parksville (Toochin *et al.* 2014)
- 4.(1) immature/ female November 8-16, 2015: Linda Norman (photo) New Denver (L. Norman Pers. Comm.)

Hypothetical Records:

- 1.(1) adult male June 8-11, 2006: Les and Ruby Wade: Jordan River (Toochin *et al.* 2014)
- 2.(1) adult male July 29, 2009: Tina Hansen: Sooke (Toochin *et al.* 2014)
- 3.(1) adult female July 4, 2013: Heather Sapergia, Suzanne Bahr: "Forests for the World" near UNBC, Prince George (Toochin *et al.* 2014)
- 4.(1) immature male September 24, 2013: Logan Lalonde: 1791 Spruce Grove Court, Kelowna (Toochin *et al.* 2014)

Observation withdrawn by Observer:

- 1.(1) adult female May 16, 2009: Gordie Gadsden: Island 22, Chilliwack (Toochin *et al.* 2014)

Acknowledgements

We wish to thank Mark Wall and Michele Humphrey for allowing us to use their photographs of the Summer Tanager from Blue River. We also wish to thank El-Khahlafaw "Brashir" for allowing us to use his photographs of the Summer Tanager from Parksville. All photographs are used with the permission of the photographer and are protected by copyright law. Photographs are not to be reproduced, published or retransmitted on any website without the authorization of the photographer.

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