

Western tanager

Piranga ludoviciana

By Dave Stalling

A few springs ago, downtown Missoula was graced with a surprising, unusual display of brilliant red-orange and yellow highlights. Nearly everywhere I looked along the Clark Fork River, colorful western tanagers were flickering among the trees and brush. The sparrow-sized songbirds were migrating north from their wintering grounds in Mexico and Central America. Usually they stay at higher elevations, in conifer forests. But because that spring was exceptionally wet in western Montana, bugs were everywhere. I could see the birds eating aphids on the mountain ash trees along the river. Watching those brightly colored tanagers made me feel for a few moments like I was in the tropics.



Identification

Western tanagers belong to the cardinal family, as do grosbeaks and buntings. During breeding season, the male is the easiest to recognize. He has a red-orange face and head; yellow body; a black back, wings, and tail; and yellowish-white wing bars. In September the male's head turns olive and stays that way until the following March. The female is mostly yellow, with an olive back and head, black wings and tail, and white and yellow wing bars. She looks a bit like a female oriole. Both male and female western tanagers are about 7 inches long and have a pale, pointed bill.

Voice

The western tanager's song is similar to the robin's, or, as a friend once put it, "Like a robin with a sore throat." The song comes in short, hoarse bursts, sounding like a dry *pid-i-DIT*.

Breeding and nesting

The western tanager breeds from May through July in open coniferous and mixed deciduous-coniferous forests containing

Dave Stalling was a longtime Montana resident who now lives in northern California.

lodgepole pine, Douglas fir, and ponderosa pine. It breeds farther north than any of the other "neotropical" warblers (those living partly or year-round in Central or South America). Some western tanagers migrate as far as the Yukon, Northwest Territories, and southeastern Alaska, adding bright bursts of color to those northern climes.

Western tanager nests are usually a flimsy, shallow open cup of twigs, grasses, hair, or fine plant fibers. The birds build their nests in pine trees atop branches well out from the trunk.

The female lays three to five eggs, bluish-green with brown spots. She incubates the eggs for up to 13 days. The chicks are fed by both parents and fledge (leave the nest) 11 to 15 days after hatching.

Migration

Each fall western tanagers head south to the tropics. Some fly as far as Nicaragua and Costa Rica. Most winter in central Mexico, and some travel no farther than southern California.

On their wintering range, the birds occupy pine and pine-oak woodlands as well as low-canopied scrub forests, forest edges, and coffee plantations. They migrate alone or in groups of as many as 30.

Scientific name

Piranga is of obscure origins, while *ludoviciana* is from the New Latin *ludovician*, meaning "from Louisiana," likely referring to the location of early sightings by scientists.

Food

Western tanagers catch most of their food by "gleaning" (picking bugs from trees or off the ground) but are most visible while "hawking" (catching prey while in flight). They eat a wide range of insects, including wasps, ants, beetles, grasshoppers, and caterpillars. Spruce budworms are a favorite food. Western tanagers also consume fruits such as hawthorn apples, raspberries, elderberries, wild cherries, and serviceberries.

Range in Montana

During their spring and fall migrations, western tanagers can show up nearly anywhere in Montana. In summer, the birds are found west and south of Glendive and Glasgow. During a wet spring that produces a bumper crop of aphids on mountain ash, these beautiful, brightly colored birds flicker about near rivers and streams. 🐦