

Scarlet Tanager attacks English Sparrow

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At 0813 hours on 18 November 1987 while manning the hawk trapping blind at the Cedar Grove Ornithological Research Station in south-eastern Wisconsin, I observed a scarlet tanager (*Piranga olivacea*) perched on the ground within the area that constitutes our hawk trapping area. The partially mowed trapping area is approximately 40 m X 50 M, and is within a clearing which is about 100 m X 200 m. As I watched the tanager, I saw that it made only short flights of .5 m to 2 m leading me to suspect that it was sick or weak and emaciated. Since the temperature was approximately 0° C and the date was well past the time when all tanagers should have left Wisconsin, it was reasonable to believe that the bird was handicapped in some way. Usual departure dates are in the first week of October although the latest date I found in the literature was 22 November, 1979 (Idzikowski 1980). Our trapping area had four tethered lure birds; two rock doves (*Columba livia*), one European starling (*Sturnus vulgaris*) and an English sparrow (*Passer domesticus*). Additionally, a cage containing six English sparrows was nearby.

I soon realized that the tanager was making its short flights in the direction of the tethered lure starling, which

was conspicuous due to its frequent attempts to fly up.

Eventually, the tanager landed within a meter of the starling and sat quietly there for about five minutes. Then, suddenly, it flew about 50 m and landed in a tree near the sparrow cage. Its flight was surprisingly strong as it flew 1 - 2 m off the ground. At this point I began to suspect that it was attracted to our lure birds. The tethered sparrow was on the ground only 10 m from the tanager's perch. In order to test my suspicion, I pulled the lure sparrow up as I would if I were trying to trap a hawk. The tanager instantly responded by flying directly down to the sparrow and hitting it, as would a hawk. I pushed the button, catching it in the electrically released bow net. It proved to be an apparently healthy AHY male of normal weight. Indeed, its weight of 28.8 grams was close to the mean of 28.6 ± 0.22 reported for the species, (Dunning 1984). I suspect that it intended to prey upon the sparrow, but regrettably my instinctive reaction prevented me from witnessing that possible eventuality.

Two weeks earlier, I had a somewhat similar experience with a great-crested flycatcher (*Myiarchus crinitus*), which also was present past its usual departure date and at a time when its normal food would be scarce. The flycatcher was attracted to the lure starling and hovered one meter above it. When I agitated a nearby sparrow, it flew to it and hovered only .5 m to .75 m above it. It did this for several

minutes before losing interest.

Bent, (1958), reports caterpillars as a favorite food of tanagers, as do Isler and Isler (1987). Other foods they report include beetles, lepidopters, bugs, wild fruits, buds and leaves. The only report of vertebrate food was observed by Skutch (1989), who observed a female scarlet that "picked up a pink, naked new born mouse" and fed it to a nestling.

Literature Cited

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