

Summer Tanager

Piranga rubra

The only completely red bird in North America, the strawberry-colored male Summer Tanager is an eye-catching sight against the green leaves of the forest canopy. The mustard-yellow female is harder to spot, though both sexes have a very distinctive chuckling call note. Fairly common during the summer, these birds migrate as far as the middle of South America each winter. All year long they specialize in catching bees and wasps on the wing, somehow avoiding being stung by their catches.

Keys to Identification

Size and Shape

Summer Tanagers are medium-sized, chunky songbirds with big bodies and large heads. They have large, thick, blunt-tipped bills.

Color Pattern

Adult male Summer Tanagers are entirely bright red. Females and immature males are bright yellow-green—yellow on the head and underparts and slightly greener on the back and wings. The bill is pale. Molting immature males can be patchy yellow and red.

Behavior

Summer Tanagers tend to stay fairly high in the forest canopy, where they sit still and then sally out to catch flying insects in midair, or move slowly along tree branches to glean food. Males have a sweet, whistling song similar to an American Robin; both sexes give a distinctive pit-ti-tuck call note.

Habitat

They breed near gaps and edges of open forests, particularly of deciduous trees or mixed pine-oak woodlands. In the Southwest, look for them along streams among willows, cottonwoods, mesquite, or saltcedar.

Cool Facts

- The Summer Tanager is a bee and wasp specialist. It catches these insects in flight and kills them by beating them against a branch. Before eating a bee, the tanager rubs it on the branch to remove the stinger. Summer Tanagers eat larvae, too: first they get rid of the adults, and then they tear open the nest to get the grubs.
- Like most birds that migrate long distances, the Summer Tanager puts on large fat deposits to fuel its long flight. In one study, tanagers arriving in Panama had enough fat to fly an estimated additional 890 km (553 mi).

Measurements

Both Sexes

- Length - 6.7 inches
- Weight - 1.1 ounces

