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Unusual Concentration of Summer Tanagers (*Piranga rubra*) in Northwestern Arkansas during Winter 2015-2016

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Running head: Unusual Concentration of Summer Tanagers

Summer Tanagers (*Piranga rubra*) typically breed in the southern United States and winter in Central and South America (Robinson 2012). They are common in Arkansas as migrants and nest during summer throughout the state (James and Neal 1986). However, winter records are few, particularly in the northern parts of the state (Arkansas Audubon Society 2015). Occasionally birds do occur in the United States in winter, particularly in Florida and along the Gulf Coast, but rarely further inland and then usually only as single birds (Robinson 2012). Formerly known as the “bee bird” (e.g. Attwater 1892, Golsan and Holt 1914), Summer Tanagers are bee and wasp specialists (Robinson 2012).

Prior to winter of 1981-1982, there were no records of wintering tanagers in northwestern Arkansas (Benton and Washington counties). Since then there have been only 9 records of Summer Tanagers in winter in northwestern Arkansas (J. C. Neal, *unpubl. data*). Almost all of these have been in female or

juvenile male plumage, which cannot be distinguished in the field. Two birds remained long enough that they began molting into male plumage (J. C. Neal, *pers. observ.*), so some birds were juvenile males. Almost all birds were seen at suet feeders in Fayetteville. Only one bird was usually observed in each case, except in winter of 2003-2004 when an adult male and female-like plumage bird were found at one feeder and a juvenile male appeared at another. It was presumably that bird which returned the next 4 years to the same feeder as an adult male.

During December of 2015 and January of 2016, an unprecedented 12 reports of Summer Tanagers were made in northwestern Arkansas (Table 1). Birds were not observed during the month of November in northwestern Arkansas (M. Mlodinow, *pers. observ.*), nor were there any reports of tanagers north of there that month in eBird (Cornell Laboratory of Ornithology), suggesting that these birds arrived after fall migration would have ended in late October (James

Table 1. Summary of the 12 sightings of Summer Tanagers during winter of 2015-2016 in northwest Arkansas.

LOCATION	FIRST SIGHTED	DETAILS	DURATION
Rogers-Prairie Creek	4 December	visiting water feature twice	1 week apart
Fayetteville	19 December	suet feeder at least until mid-January Eating bees at hive	~24 days, off and on
Cave Springs	19 December	observed while birding	1 day, birding
Fayetteville	20 December	observed with wasp in its bill	1 day, birding
Fayetteville	22 December	observed while birding	1 day, birding
Bella Vista	31 December	regularly at suet feeder; last date 20 February	~50 days, regular visits to suet
Fayetteville	11 January	visited suet feeder until 19 January	8 days, visited regularly
Fayetteville	15 January	at suet feeder	1 day
Fayetteville	early January	found dead in yard 20 January	~20 days
Fayetteville	14 January	single observation	1 day
Fayetteville	late January	visiting suet feeder at least until February 9	~10 days +
Fayetteville	1 February	irregular visits to suet, at least until February 10	2 sightings 10 days apart



Figure 1. Summer Tanager eating a honeybee at a bee hive in Fayetteville on 12 January 2016. Note bee on the bird's left leg. Photograph by D. Steinkraus.



Figure 2. Summer Tanager eating a wasp (probably an ichneumonid) in December of 2015 in Fayetteville. Photograph by J. Neal.

and Neal 1986). Most were in Fayetteville (Washington County), but 3 birds were in Benton County at Rogers/Prairie Creek, Cave Springs, and Bella Vista.

Most of the birds were associated with suet feeders, but 3 were observed by bird watchers away from feeders (Table 1). One bird fed on bees at a hive (Fig. 1) and one bird was observed eating a wasp during December (Fig. 2). To our knowledge, no other Summer Tanagers were reported in Arkansas that winter.

What could have caused this winter season concentration of Summer Tanagers in northwestern Arkansas? First, it was a very mild winter, with no snow and abnormally high temperatures (L'Heureux 2016). Secondly, strong winds blew from the south for much of the month of November and December (NOAA 2015), so that birds may have moved north with wind assistance. Also, suet feeders could have contributed to the survival of the tanagers as most were associated with them. However, it remains a mystery why only Summer Tanagers appeared with no other unusual species.

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