

THE WARBLER
DES MOINES AUDUBON SOCIETY
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EDITOR: JANE R. CLARK



Field Trip—Saturday, August 14, 8:00 a.m.

The Des Moines Audubon Society field trip will be held on Saturday, August 14th. Meet at the Saylorville Lake Visitors' Center parking lot at 8:00 a.m. We will be focusing on early migrants and late summer bird activity. All levels of bird watchers are encouraged to attend!

FALL PROGRAMS BEGIN!

If all goes well, we will be able to begin our fall program schedule on Tuesday, September 21st. There could be changes but at this time, planning is going forward. Des Moines Audubon meetings will begin at 7:00 p.m. and will be held in the lunchroom of the Northwest Community Center, which is located at 5110 Franklin Avenue in Des Moines. The Center is just west of Franklin Library. If you have questions about the meeting place or the programs, please contact Jane Clark at 515-223-5047 or jrclark@radiks.net.

2021

- September 21: Ray Harden on a trip to North Carolina to see Red-cockaded Woodpeckers.
- October 18: Anna Buckardt Thomas, avian ecologist at the Wildlife Diversity Program on Migration.
- November 16: Stuart and Karen-Viste Sparkman on their trip to Columbia.

2022

- February: Ty Smedes on Waterfowl Identification.
- Spring: Karl Jungbluth on Inviting Birds to Your Yard.



Summer Tanager **By Carl Nollen**

It's our only all red bird. The strawberry red male is not as brilliant, however, as the scarlet red of the male Scarlet Tanager, or the vivid red of the male cardinal, or the crimson red of both the male and female Red-headed Woodpecker. *Piranga rubra* is not as well-known as the Scarlet Tanager, *Piranga olivacea*. In Iowa, it is most likely to be seen in southern Iowa, but the Iowa Ornithologists' Union says it has been seen in 69 of our 99 counties. The genus name is from a native language, *rubra*, of course, means red, and the reason for its summer appellation is due to Linnaeus, who named it the "summer red bird." The tanager name comes from an Italian river.

Female Scarlet and Summer Tanagers are similar, with the Summer having darker wings and a darker yellow-olive plumage often with reddish blotches. Two years ago, the American Ornithological Society transferred "our" tanagers from the tanager family to the cardinal family. Will they now change the common name as well? With the zeal some ornithologists have now to rename the bird world, it wouldn't surprise me.

Locally, I am most likely to see the Summer Tanager at Yellow Banks Park in southeast Polk County, where I have seen it near the Bluffs Overlook. Its stuttery "pit-it-tuck" call tells me instantly I am hearing a Summer Tanager. Its song is more melodious than the Scarlet Tanager, I think. You are more likely to hear this tanager than see it, as it prefers the tree tops.

This tanager is mainly insectivorous, especially liking to fly out to catch bees and wasps, then bashing them against a branch to remove their stingers. They have been known to go after wasp nests and bother bee hives. Later in the season they will eat small fruits. Upland woods are the preferred habitat. The female builds a shallow nest far out from a tree trunk, laying three to five greenish or bluish eggs with brown marks. The male feeds the female while she incubates. They normally limit their reproduction to one brood. Their season in Iowa runs from April to September, but they have been seen as late as November and rarely, later times. They migrate primarily at night. Winter grounds range from Mexico through Central America to northern South America.

Gladys Black reported her experiences with the Summer Tanager in her 1992 book, *Iowa Birdlife*. She netted and banded one at her home in Pleasantville, saw a male at a suet feeder in Des Moines, and heard one by the dam at Lake Red Rock.

The Summer Tanager's population in Iowa is probably stable but must still be considered an uncommon breeding bird of Iowa.

Turkey Vulture **By Carol Berrier**

Spring brings the return of songbirds to the Midwest. We welcome their bright colors and cheerful songs, but sometimes we fail to notice that in mid-March the silent Turkey Vultures also are back and soaring above us. Sometimes known as "buzzards," they may be confused with the Bald Eagles in our neighborhood. Remember that vultures soar with their wings in a dihedral, and that the black-bodied vultures do not have white heads and tails. In fact, the skin on their featherless heads is red except in juveniles where it is dark. Because they feed on decaying carrion, naked heads and necks are easier to keep clean.

Vultures often start the day by perching in the sun with wings spread, and end the day by defecating on their legs to cool off. When soaring they are searching for food. Ornithologists now believe that Turkey Vultures have keen olfactory senses as well as good eyesight. They can smell a carcass that is hidden from sight. Their habits may sound repulsive, but vultures do us a service by helping to keep our world clean.

Turkey Vultures usually lay two eggs on the ground or in a hollow tree, cave, or deserted building. The nestlings hatch after 35 days of incubation and can fly at 9-10 weeks. The fledglings from this single annual brood have a lengthy dependency on their parents. Vultures cannot carry food with their beaks or with their feet, so they feed their young by regurgitation. Their stomachs also provide them and their young with defense. If threatened on their nest, vultures will hiss and project strongly acidic vomit.

Except when nesting, Turkey Vultures are gregarious, feeding and roosting with others of their kind. I have even found one to be friendly. I attended an Audubon meeting in Iowa some years ago where raptors were displayed and discussed. The educational birds (birds that couldn't be released because of their injuries) were in cages and were brought out one by one, except for a Turkey Vulture which was released right away on the floor. Not a raptor like the hawks and owls, it was allowed to roam around the room. It stopped by me intrigued by my shoe laces, and looked up at me in a friendly manner as it played with the shoestrings. I felt sorry for the social creature at my feet, for it had no contact with other vultures.

Red-eyed Vireo Species Account

American Bird Conservancy

Bird of the Week feature: June 24, 2021

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SCIENTIFIC NAME: *Vireo olivaceus*

POPULATION: 130 million

TREND: Increasing

HABITAT: Nests in deciduous woods; winters in lowland forests



The Red-eyed Vireo is one of the most common songbirds of eastern and central U.S. forests during the summer months. Like the Ovenbird and Scarlet Tanager, it is more often heard than seen. A glimpse reveals an olive-green bird with contrasting slate-gray cap, black eye-stripes framing a white eyebrow, and vivid red eyes. But its rather subdued appearance is not this vireo's most well-known characteristic.

"The Red-eyed Vireo is preeminently famous as a singer," observed noted ornithologist Arthur C. Bent. "No other of our birds sings so persistently all day long, and because his long-continued series of utterances, given in short, emphatic phrases, going on for hours, calls to mind a lengthy sermon, he has won the title 'Preacher.'" One intrepid researcher counted the number of songs sung by a male Red-eyed Vireo on territory — the bird sang over 20,000 times in just 14 hours!

But the Red-eyed Vireo's seemingly endless song is notable for more than sheer staying power.

Vociferous Vireo Vocalist

In addition to its vocal endurance, a male Red-eyed Vireo commands a large repertoire of song phrases. Unlike other passerines, which sing the same song repeatedly, this talented vireo's "vocabulary" — which averages 47 different phrases — allows one male to sing over 30 song types, and combine those into up to 80 different songs! In addition, each male combines these phrases and song types in his own way.

Researchers have recorded an astounding 12,500 different Red-eyed Vireo song types — an amazing attribute for a supposedly unassuming songbird. Unlike its song, the Red-eyed Vireo's call is a whiny mew that sounds somewhat similar to a Gray Catbird. Both males and females call aggressively in response to potential predators or intruders entering their territory.

Taking the Red-eyed Flight

The Red-eyed Vireo is one of the most common migratory songbirds nesting in North America, with a breeding range spanning across the boreal forests of southern Canada and throughout deciduous forests of the northwestern, central, and eastern United States.

These small songbirds are mighty migrants, flying long distances at night in groups of up to 30, or in mixed-species flocks with migrating warblers, tanagers, and flycatchers. The Red-eyed Vireo flies all the way to northern South America for the winter, concentrating especially in the Amazon Basin. Wintering Red-eyed Vireos may remain with mixed-species flocks on their wintering grounds.

Swapping Menus

Like the Cape May Warbler, Wood Thrush, and many other Neotropical migrants, the Red-eyed Vireo is primarily insectivorous during the breeding season, taking a wide variety of insects, including caterpillars, beetles, cicadas, wasps, and grasshoppers. It moves slowly through the canopy while foraging, picking prey off leaves or stems with its stout, slightly hooked bill. It also flies out to snag insects in mid-air, sometimes continuing to sing as it secures its meal. Interestingly, breeding Red-eyed Vireo pairs forage at different heights within the canopy, with males feeding higher in the trees, nearer to their singing perches, and females foraging at lower levels, closer to their nests.

As fall migration approaches, the Red-eyed Vireo adds a variety of berries and seeds to its diet, packing on the fat it needs to fuel its long-distance journey. During the winter, it switches to a largely fruit diet.

Continued on back page.....

Red-eyed Vireo Species Account (Continued)

Aggressive Nest Defenders

Male Red-eyed Vireos return to the breeding grounds before females. Each male stakes out and defends a territory through song, patrolling a number of singing perches around the edge of his territory, and aggressively attacking and driving out intruding males throughout the breeding season.

Newly arriving females each choose a nest site within a male's territory. After mating, the female builds a cup-shaped, hanging nest between the fork of two tree branches, often concealed under hanging vegetation that provides extra security. Although not as pendulous as a Baltimore Oriole, the vireo's pouch-like nest of grasses, roots, bark strips, and spider webs is easy to identify. Unfortunately, these beautiful nests are often found by the Brown-headed Cowbird, a brood parasite that lays its eggs in other bird's nests.

After completing her clutch, the female Red-eyed Vireo incubates her three to four eggs and broods the young after they hatch. The male will bring food to the female, starting during nest-building and continuing while she is taking care of the young. Red-eyed Vireos often nest several times per season, particularly if the first nest is unsuccessful.

Juvenile Red-eyed Vireos are easily identified by their brown eye color. They do not attain the red eyes of an adult until their second year.

A Need for Tall Trees and Clear Pathways

Although the Red-eyed Vireo remains abundant, it contends with the same threats facing rarer birds, particularly habitat loss and fragmentation on its breeding and wintering ranges. It is a frequent victim of collisions with glass, towers, and wind turbines.

American Bird Conservancy (ABC) provides a number of resources to help reduce these threats. We are involved in a number of large-scale conservation initiatives to protect and recover habitat on breeding and wintering grounds, including BirdScapes, Joint Ventures, and Southern Wings. Our collisions program helps to prevent communications tower collisions and fatalities, and provides solutions to prevent bird collisions with glass, particularly at home windows.

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