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Scarlet Tanager assists Summer Tanager with nesting activities in Cook County

By Wes Serafin



Summer Tanagers (*Piranga rubra*) appear every spring in Cook County, but their nearest breeding sites in Illinois are to the south and southwest, in Kankakee and Will Counties. Doug Stotz of Chicago's Field Museum of Natural History has found Summer Tanagers in Cook County during June in eight of the past ten years. In 1996, Craig Thayer reported a male Summer Tanager at Swallow Cliff Forest Preserve in southwest Cook County from June through 1 August; and in 1997, I observed a female and two fighting males there on 15 June.

In late May and early June of 2006, there were several sightings of Summer Tanagers at Swallow Cliff along a trail where Scarlet Tanagers (*Piranga olivacea*) breed annually. Both species were sometimes found sharing the same tree. On 10 June, Cindy Alberico pointed out a female Summer Tanager giving scolding calls repeatedly for more than five minutes. Similar reports continued for two weeks, and I determined that

Above: Summer Tanager on territory, Swallow Cliff, Palos Preserves, Cook County. 19 July 2006.
Photo by Wes Serafin.

I would spend my next weekend looking for evidence of breeding.

Summer Tanager nesting confirmed in Cook County

Walter Marcisz, Sue Friscia, her niece, and I went to the tanager trail on 8 July, and we soon discovered very promising evidence of breeding: A male Summer Tanager was carrying a caterpillar in its beak. We followed the male for 10-15 minutes as he flew from tree to tree, then finally to a nest on which a female was sitting. The male fed the caterpillar to the female, confirming that a nesting attempt was underway. The nest was about 25 feet above ground, over a multi-use trail that loops west, then south, from the parking lot at Swallow Cliff. The nest site is consistent with information in Robinson's (1996) *Birds of North America* account of Summer Tanager, which notes that this species prefers to nest above an open area in the woods. This is the first documented nesting of Summer Tanager in Cook County, Illinois.

In a 10 July posting to IBET, the Illinois birding list-serve, Jerry Kumery mentioned scores of cross-country runners, joggers, and moms walking with kids and strollers trafficking below the nest, with no apparent disturbance to the birds.

Both tanager species males feed young

An intriguing twist developed in the saga soon after the discovery of the nest, when the female Summer Tanager was seen being fed by a male Scarlet Tanager. Two young were visible in the nest beginning 10 July, and