

COLOR VARIATION IN MALE SCARLET TANAGER WINGS

by Kenneth C. Parkes, Carnegie Museum of Natural History

EDITOR'S NOTE: Kenneth C. Parkes is Senior Curator of Birds at the Carnegie Museum of Natural History in Pittsburgh and editorial advisor to American Birds. In the letter dated November 23, 1988 that accompanied this note, Dr. Parkes stated, "I would guess that we see a 'wing-barred' Scarlet Tanager almost every year among the birds banded at our Powdermill Nature Reserve. Some of these, with only one or two red or orange feathers in the coverts, would probably not be conspicuous at the usual field observing distances for Scarlet Tanagers, but we have handled enough of them now so as not to be surprised by them."

The red wing bars reported by Ted Raymond (*Bird Observer* 16: 270, October 1988), although rare, are well known to banders and museum curators who handle hundreds of male Scarlet Tanagers and were noted in the literature many years ago. Dwight (*Annals N. Y. Academy of Science* 13: 221, 1900), in his classic paper on molts and plumages of the passerine birds of New York, stated of the "first nuptial" (i.e., first alternate) plumage of this species, "As a freak, scarlet coverts are occasionally assumed." In a reference more widely available, Bent (*U. S. National Museum Bulletin* 211: 484, 1958) reprinted Dwight's plumage descriptions intact. Ridgway (*U. S. National Museum Bulletin* 50, part 2: 88, 1902) wrote that "the middle wing coverts are sometimes marked with red, orange, or yellow, rarely forming a broad and conspicuous band."

I examined eighty-one red-plumaged male Scarlet Tanagers in the collection of the Carnegie Museum of Natural History, and found the following variants. Unless stated otherwise, all are in their definitive alternate [breeding] plumage (ASY of banding terminology; SY indicates a bird in its first alternate plumage).

Bilateral full red wing bars: Pennsylvania, 2 (1 SY).

Full red wing bar one side only: Pennsylvania, 2 (both SY); District of Columbia, 1; Iowa, 1.

Bilateral full yellow wing bars: Pennsylvania, 3.

Bilateral mixed red and yellow wing bars: Wisconsin, 1.

Bilateral mixed orange and yellow wing bars: Pennsylvania, 1.

One red feather among black coverts both sides: Pennsylvania, 1 (SY).

One red feather among black coverts one side only: Pennsylvania, 4; Maryland, 2; New York, 1.

A few yellow feathers among black coverts both sides: Pennsylvania, 1.

Also an SY male with orange body plumage (an uncommon variant of this

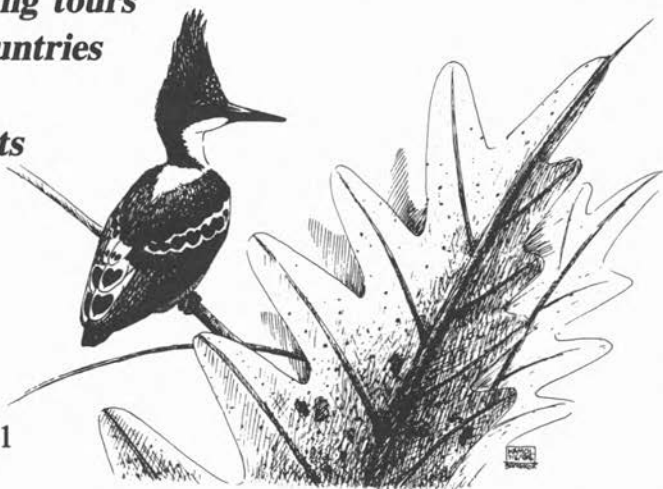
age stage) with one orange covert on the left wing and two on the right: Maryland.

This sample cannot be considered as random, of course. The majority of our United States specimens are from Pennsylvania, creating a geographic bias. And almost certainly there would have been a bias toward obtaining the unusual individual during the period of active bird collecting in this country. Even today, when we at the Carnegie receive salvaged birds from the public (tower kills, window kills, road kills, etc.), we are likely to divert odd-plumaged birds to preparation as study skins rather than as skeletal or alcoholic specimens. Nevertheless, in spite of these biases, it should be apparent that yellow, orange, or red feathers among the black wing coverts of male Scarlet Tanagers may be expected to appear occasionally anywhere within the range of the species.

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