

Pennsylvania Rare Bird Report

SPECIES: Summer Tanager (*Piranga rubra*)

AGE: probably HY/SY male/female, but possibly adult female (See Pyle note at end.)

DATE: 2 September 2004

TIME: 0845

LOCATION: Harrison Hills Park, Natrona Heights, Allegheny County

OBSERVER: Paul Hess, 1412 Hawthorne St., Natrona Heights, PA 15065

WEATHER AND LIGHT: Temperature in the 60s F.; bird was in bright sun

DISTANCE: about 20 feet up in a tree that was about 10 feet away from me

OPTICS: Leica 8X32 binoculars

BEHAVIOR: It was perched on a deciduous tree branch among a small flock of vireo and warbler migrants when I first saw it. After two or three minutes it flew off with the flock. It never attempted to feed.

DESCRIPTION:

General appearance and size: robust yellowish passerine, perhaps twice as bulky and twice as long as the vireos and warblers around it. The head appeared to slope gradually upward from the bill to a low peak at the rear, then a sharp angle down to the nape.

Plumage:

* Upperparts were plain pale brownish with a hint of yellow. Even though the bird was above my eye level, when it shifted position I could see the crown, the nape, and most of the back. I did not get a good look at the upper tail.

* Wings were the same color and tone as the rest of the upperparts, not darker. The coverts were faintly edged with a slightly paler shade of brown than the inner portions of the coverts, but these edges were not conspicuous and before I studied them closely, the coverts appeared to be entirely plain.

* Sides of the face were the same pale brownish with hint of yellow as the rest of the underparts, which shaded gradually into dull yellowish throat. There was no auricular patch, eye ring, or supercilium. Sibley mentions a darkish eyeline, but none was visible on this bird; perhaps it is not present on a young bird.

* Underparts were entirely dull yellow with no markings, including the throat, breast, belly, flanks, and undertail coverts. I did not note the underside of the tail.

*Bill: Tan, or what is sometimes called "horn." Proportionally to the head size, it was conspicuously thick, heavy, and long.

SEPARATION FROM SIMILAR SPECIES: Larger size, much larger bill, slightly peaked crown, colors of plain brownish above and yellowish below with no olive or grayish separated it from Scarlet, Western, and Hepatic Tanager. In addition, wings the same color and shade as the back separated it from Scarlet Tanager (which has darker wings); pale bill and lack of grayish cheek patch separated it from Hepatic Tanager; and lack of wingbars separated it from Western Tanager.

The thick bill and robust, heavy-chested appearance separated it from any young or female oriole that might have been similarly colored.

It was much larger than the few fall vireos or warblers that are plain brownish-yellow on upperparts and dull yellow on underparts. I do not know of any other species its size that it could be confused with.

DISCUSSION: When I first spotted the bird, all I could see between the foliage was its mid-section, not the head or tail, yet it struck me immediately as something worth studying. Even based just on the mid-section, it seemed big-chested and different from anything I would have expected to see. The dull yellow underparts combined with the plain brownish upperparts and upperwings on a bird of this size did not bring any species immediately to mind. Then it shifted its position from behind the leaves, and the bulky overall appearance, the large head, the crown shape, and the heavy bill all pointed to Summer Tanager.

I have seen only about 15-20 Summer Tanagers of this southeastern subspecies during the last 40 years, most of them in Maryland and Virginia. (I have seen a few birds of the larger-billed and brighter western subspecies in New Mexico, but that race differs enough from the eastern race that it is almost irrelevant to this bird's ID.)

All I have seen were adult males or fairly bright adult females, and I am not familiar with this bird's dull plumage. The field guides don't illustrate it, but I did find it described in the Pyle *Identification Guide to North American Birds: Part 1* which refers to "brownish yellow" body plumage for hatch-year and second-year males and females. Pyle comments that "HY/SYs probably are not reliably sexed." He adds, however, that among adult females and HY/SY birds, "many intermediates can be difficult or impossible to age reliably" – so apparently I should not be confident to call this a subadult bird even though it had such dull shades of color.

This report is written later on September 2 from notes made immediately after the observation.

--Paul Hess

Pennsylvania Ornithological Records Committee

Voting Tabulation – Round One

Species: Summer Tanager (Piranga rubra)

Date of Sighting: 2 September 2004 to 2 September 2004

Location: HARRISON HILLS PARK

County : ALLEGHENY

Observer(s): Paul Hess

Date of Submission: 2004

Submitted by: Paul Hess

Written Description: Yes

Photo: No

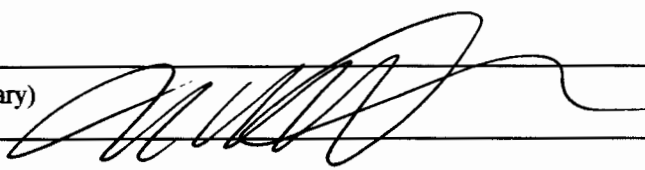
Specimen: No

Recording: No

Member	Class I	Class II	Class III	Class IV-A	Class IV-B	Class IV-C	Class V	Abstain
R. Wiltraut			X					
D. Heathcote								
P. Guris			X					
J. Stanley			X					
E. Witmer			X					
R. Leberman			X					
M. Sharp			X					
TOTALS			6					
DECISION			X					

Comments: *6/0*

Signature (Secretary)



Date:

11/12/05