

PA Rare Bird Report

Submission Date	2017-06-01 17:24:28
Observer's Name	Paul Bernhardt
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Observer's Address	1022 Thomas Road Plymouth Meeting PA 19462 United States
Species (Common Name)	Summer Tanager
Species (Scientific Name)	<i>Piranga rubra</i>
Number of individuals	1
Age(s) and Plumage(s) and Sex (if known)	First year male with molting plumage
Observation Date and Time	05-19-2017 8:00 AM
Did you submit this sighting to eBird?	Yes
Link to eBird checklist	http://ebird.org/ebird/view/checklist/S36979129
County	Montgomery
Location (City, Borough, Township)	Plymouth Meeting, Plymouth Township, Montgomery County
Exact Site (E.g. Name of park, lake, road)	Between home property (1022 Thomas Road Plymouth Meeting PA 19462) and Plymouth Swim Club parking fields
GPS coordinates of sighting	40°06'39.5"N, 75°18'13.9"W
Habitat	Line of trees/thicket between yard and fields (serves as a parking lot for one quarter of year starting after Memorial Day); at edge of thicket, bordering on edge of a few acres of woods with a stream
Distance to bird	Around 30-40 feet
Viewing conditions	Mostly sunny and warm; early enough in day that light was not harsh but late enough that shadows/dimness was not an issue
Optical equipment used	Zeiss 10x42 Conquest HD Binoculars

Description

First spring male molting; mostly red on back and upper half, yellow blend in belly and on under tail; absolutely no black on wings though maybe a splotch of yellow (wasn't a lighting issue where it could have been a scarlet tanager), moderately thick dull yellow blunt bill

Seen for about 30 seconds toward top of tree in back yard, before flying further behind yard into swimming club parking lot fields area; searched for another 40 minutes and heard occasionally singing for first 5-10 minutes distantly (sounded similar to robin but song was shorter and less varied and not choppy...more flowing and maybe a bit sweeter); not found in later searches

Behavior (be as detailed as possible about what the bird was doing)

I initially saw the bird as it was coming up (perhaps from a lower part of tree or from another tree slightly behind) to one of the highest branches in the tallest tree between the properties. It made a short chipping noise but then perched there quietly in an alert fairly upright position for about 30 seconds (angled so that it was facing 45 degrees to my left, providing front and wing view). It was making choppy movements with it's head, rotating it parallel to the ground and looking around in short bursts. It flipped its body around just before it flew almost directly away from my property across the fielded area. While searching, I could hear it singing fairly consistently for about 5-10 minutes likely in a row of trees on the other sides of the fields (I cannot access this area due to a fence). I did not see or hear the bird after this.

Separation from similar species (How you eliminated others)

As a medium-sized (while no other birds were close by, as it is my home I am fairly good with bird sizing at this close ranger based on environment), red passerine, it seems it could only realistically confused with a male cardinal or male scarlet tanager (both being more expected in southeast PA, obviously). A male cardinal is fairly trivial to rule out - the bill was dull colored and blunt and not orange and grosbeak-sized like a cardinal; there was no crest on the head or black face patch around the eyes and bill. Unlike a scarlet tanager the wings were red (with some yellowish splotches on the lower half); there was no sign of any black on the wings. Additionally, I am not sure if a young scarlet tanager would have a yellowish bill.

The other obvious indicator color-wise that this was not a cardinal or scarlet tanager would be the bird's molting appearance with red upper parts and upper chest, and yellowish splotching on lower half turning to all yellow below and under the tail.

Discussion – anything else relevant to the observation that will aid the committee in evaluating it:

The lighting was pretty exceptional, erasing any doubt on my end that the sun/shadows could have been playing a trick with respect to coloring (that is, the red-yellow blend and lack of any black on the wings were clear). My yard slopes down, so while the bird was at the top of a 30 or so foot tree, it was only about 15-20 feet above my straight-ahead view. Having lived in North Carolina for 5 years (left about 4 years ago) where summer tanagers are relatively common, I am also fairly used to seeing them and identifying differences with scarlet tanagers, especially with the obvious differences in males (and in this case, a first-Spring male).

While there was time to take a picture, my camera was in the house (and the battery was dead from the previous weekend's PAMC). My iPhone was also inside, though it would have been pushing the distance for usable given that I have an iPhone 5S. Fortunately, I did not attempt to run inside as it would have flown anyway before getting back out, let alone attempting a picture. More importantly, I couldn't run as I was still recovering from a surgery that had me home birding most of May (during the PAMC I could only visit places where I didn't have to walk more than a tenth of a mile or so).

Are you positive of your identification ? (Why or why not)

Yes (see some reasons in discussion above). Also, I had a relatively long amount of time I had to view the bird in perfect conditions and extra confirmation with it singing after dodging out of sight.

During

None

After

Perused ebird pictures for the purpose of checking out bills of young scarlet tanagers (out of curiosity if they could be yellowish) and also CornellLab to confirm the song

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