



Without a closer look at the wings, it is best to age this individual as an after-hatch-year (AHY) male; simply put, this could be either an SY (second-year) or an ASY male tanager. In late summer and early fall, this species molts on the breeding grounds before migrating. This particular individual appears to be a bit more than halfway done replacing the red alternate body plumage with the yellowish-green feathers of basic plumage. *Elkhart, Indiana; September 2002.* © John Cassady.

Text by Thomas B. Johnson†

The Scarlet Tanager is certainly one of the most striking North American passerines. Generally, the species shows two color patterns, red with dark wings vs. green with dark wings. However, a closer look shows substantial differences in Scarlet Tanagers due to age, sex, and molt beyond the general green or red patterns.



Front Cover

This red Scarlet Tanager is an adult male, or, more specifically, an after-second-year (ASY) male. The gorgeous red body is the most striking characteristic of this alternate plumage, which contrasts sharply with the jet-black flight feathers. *Summit County, Ohio; May 2007.* © Matthew Studebaker.



Cover 2

This individual, like the front cover bird, is another spring ASY male Scarlet Tanager. In the beginning of the second



Cover 1

This motley bird is a male Scarlet Tanager in prebasic molt.

plumage/molt cycle in males of this species, a prebasic molt results in the remaining brownish juvenal flight feathers being replaced by the solid dark-black flight feathers. From this point in a male tanager's life, its wings will appear solid black when not in active molt, whether in basic plumage or in alternate plumage as in the lovely individual shown here. *Summit County, Ohio; May 2007.* © *Matthew Stuebaker.*



Cover 3

At the end of the first winter of a male Scarlet Tanager's life, a prealternate molt is initiated before the northbound migration. In the Summer Tanager, it is fairly typical for "first-alternate" males to show a fairly even mix of red and green body plumage; however, most first-alternate (SY) male Scarlet Tanagers show

completely red body plumage like this individual (with the exception of one unreplaced yellow-green scapular). More interesting, however, than the body plumage of this bird is the aspect of the wings. Clearly, two different generations of feathers are involved, with most coverts and a few inner tertials contrasting black against a panel of paler, brownish-gray primaries and secondaries. The black coverts and tertials are grown on the wintering grounds as part of the first prealternate molt and contrast with the retained juvenal primaries and secondaries. At the end of this bird's summer vacation in North America, a prebasic molt will leave this bird with a set of darker-black primaries and secondaries; these flight feathers will continue to be dark black for the rest

of the bird's life, regardless of whether it is in alternate or basic plumage. *Galveston County, Texas; May 2005.* © *Alan Murphy.*

Cover 4

When seen in April, the grayish, pale-edged wing coverts and flight feathers in combination with yellow-green body plumage of this Scarlet Tanager make it a female. As females can be tricky to age precisely, it is safe (and accurate) to call this bird an AHY individual, especially since most field birders don't have the luxury of examining each feather of a flighty passerine at close range. *Galveston County, Texas; May 2008.* © *Alan Murphy.*



TBJ is an undergraduate biology major at Cornell University, where he pursues a strong interest in bird migration and distribution. Hooked on traveling and photography since childhood, he is devoted to learning more about birds and promoting their conservation.