

### Summer Shower—A Scarlet Tanager’s Dream Come True...and Mine, Too!

by Richard Ingram



*Scarlet Tanager by Glenn Tepke,  
[www.pbase.com/gtepkc](http://www.pbase.com/gtepkc).*

**S**unday, June 26, 2005 was one of the hottest days on record in Hudson, New Hampshire. Temperatures soared into the 90s and the humidity was almost unbearable. We had several days of hot weather and no rain, and most people were either at the beach or somewhere air-conditioned. I, on the other hand, was outside during the worst of the heat, doing yard work and watering a bed of wildflowers to try to save some recent plantings.

Our property is a great environment for all sorts of animals (gray and red squirrels, eastern flying squirrels, chipmunks, mice, moles, woodchucks, skunks, opossum, deer, and even a rather unsavory-looking fisher, which I have seen just once) and birds (sparrows, Tufted Titmice, American Goldfinches, Purple Finches, Northern Cardinals, Blue Jays, Baltimore Orioles, American Crows, hawks, a variety of woodpeckers, including the Pileated Woodpecker, and occasionally a beautiful Indigo Bunting that graces my birdfeeder a few times during the spring and summer).

The wildflower bed that I was watering borders the woods, and I saw and heard a few birds flying around, but thought nothing of their presence. We seem to have established an understanding—I take care of their property. It’s that simple. I am a caretaker, here to provide a safe haven, food, and a place for them to call home should they choose to stay. Nothing seemed unusual about this day, other than the unbearable heat and humidity! I was looking forward to finishing and going inside soon.

Suddenly a male Scarlet Tanager swooped down through the water spray from the hose and landed in a nearby young maple tree. He sat in the tree, carefully hidden by the big maple leaves, not seeming to move a feather. I stopped watering immediately so as to not disturb him and so I could watch him. Scarlet Tanagers are a relatively unusual bird sighting for me. They are usually a deep woods bird, preferring their solitude and privacy to entering into “human” territory with open spaces and watering hoses.

Observing this beautiful bird brought back a vivid memory from about 20 years ago, when I lived in Holbrook, Massachusetts. It was the first and only other time I had seen a Scarlet Tanager. During that sighting, I actually saw a pair mating—a sighting that prompted me to call the Massachusetts Audubon Society. I was afraid that the person on the other end of the phone line would think I was some sort of bizarre individual to be reporting that, but I had to tell someone about what I had just seen. To my great relief, she was as excited as I was when I described the pair mating. She confirmed that I was not only correct in identifying what I had seen, but also incredibly fortunate to have ever seen such behavior.

Twenty years later, on a hot, humid June afternoon in New Hampshire, here I was, face-to-face with another male Scarlet Tanager. He was about 15 feet away from me, closer than I could ever imagine I might be to such a beautiful bird in the wild! I knelt down and remained motionless. I assumed I had but an instant to take in his brilliant red and black feathers. To my amazement, he did not leave. Was I dreaming this? Was the heat and humidity getting to me? And if not, then what was this bird doing?

After about 10 minutes of watching the motionless Scarlet Tanager and trying to brush away pesky summer bugs without disturbing him, I cautiously arose, went into the garage, and called to my wife to come outside to see him. She had never seen a Scarlet Tanager, but knew that it must be something spectacular for me to call her to come outside on a day like this. As she stepped onto the driveway, the Scarlet Tanager flew up and across our field of view, landing in a white birch tree in front of our living room. After a few more minutes of observing him in the birch tree, I decided to return to my wildflower watering, grateful for the chance to have seen this beautiful bird for only the second time in my life. That in itself was remarkable. Little did I know the story would not end there.

A couple of minutes later, the Scarlet Tanager flew back to where I was watering and landed in the spray from the hose. He hopped around for a minute, bobbing in and out of the water spray, and then stopped to let the water soak him. I began to understand what he wanted—a shower! After his feathers were quite wet, he flew somewhat awkwardly into a nearby tree, where he proceeded to preen himself. His wet wings went up one at a time as his beak went to work cleaning his body. About five minutes later, he landed in the water spray again and repeated the entire process. He literally let me drench him with the water spray, to the point where his feathers were matted and he could barely fly into the nearby tree to continue preening.

I had a hunch that his mate might be nearby, but so far only the male was making his presence known. Then, suddenly, an olive-green female flew into another nearby tree, then down to the ground under the water spray. She also wanted to take advantage of the water shower. I sprayed her and she hopped around until she too was drenched. She then flew into another nearby tree to preen herself. She repeated this several times, flying into the water wherever I happened to have the hose directed. I stood there with the hose running for about one-half hour while they both took full advantage of the water. I would have stayed there for the entire afternoon, but they finally had enough and flew off into the woods.

I have not seen them since, but every time I go out to work in the yard or to water, I look as far into the woods as I can see, hoping for another glimpse of their beauty. I know they are out there somewhere, deep in the woods. And should we have another hot, dry spell, I hope they remember the hose and know that they can come to the wildflowers for another shower anytime.

I'm waiting...and dreaming....

*Richard Ingram lives in Hudson, New Hampshire, with his wife, cat, and an abundance of wildlife on their wooded property. He has fed and observed birds for most of his life. His only regret is that a mild hearing loss causes him to miss some of the beautiful high-pitched songs of his feathered friends.*