

First Specimen Record of Western Tanager in Southern Saskatchewan

by E. Manley Callin, Fort San

As the name implies, the Western Tanager (*Piranga ludoviciana*) is a strictly western species and its typical home is in the mountain valleys and foothills of western Canada and the United States. Undoubtedly a few birds nest regularly in the evergreen belt of central Saskatchewan but in other parts of our province and in the provinces to the east it is extremely rare or absent.

This article concerns a specimen, a beautiful, highly-coloured male, that apparently died of cold and exposure at Broadview, Sask., on May 13, 1963, and which is now in the Saskatchewan Museum of Natural History at Regina. From 6:00 p.m. on May 12 to 7:00 a.m. on May 13 there was 5.3 inches of snow and .53 inches of rain at Broadview, and the temperature dropped to 30.8° F. and rose very little during the morning. At about 10:30 a.m. on May 13, 1963, Mrs. Tony Weidl rushed over to the home of my sister, Mrs. Ernest Fredlund, and asked her to come over and see a strange bird that was sheltering in a nearby wood shed with open sides. As they were arriving on the scene, four and a half year old Barbara Weidl, who had stood guard, called out "It just fell over on the ground." When they picked it up seconds later it was dead but, of course, still warm and limp. Karen Fredlund and Connie Barr, both 13 years of age and greatly interested then proceeded to the home of Mr. and Mrs. Charles Thacker to have the bird identified (the Thackers have been enthusiastic observers for many years).

Special mention should be made of four and a half year old Barbara for she exhibited unusual initiative and powers of observation. While the bird was being examined at Thackers, Barbara thought of the collection of nature cards belonging to her seven year old brother Donald and, after a brief search, handed her mother a card with a coloured picture of the Western Tanager. As the readers know, those cards are enclosed with various packaged foods and, from all reports, they provide a

good deal of educational entertainment to those children who collect and trade them.

The **Catalogue of the Birds of Saskatchewan** (Mitchell, 1924) refers to the distribution of the Western Tanager as follows: Not common; noted only in western part of Canadian Zone. Specimens (Nos. 1384, 1413) taken at Big River, May 23, 1922.

In personal correspondence of June 3, 1963, Fred G. Bard, Director of the Saskatchewan Museum of Natural History, mentions his probable sighting of a female tanager at Cochin on May 25, 1935.

A record of a Western Tanager nesting at Kazan Lake, about 65 miles north of Flotten Lake, July 6, 1942, was reported by Thomas E. Randall in the **Blue Jay** (20:60-72). At Flotten Lake an adult male was collected July 26, 1948, as reported by W. E. Godfrey in his **Birds of the Cypress Hills and Flotten Lake Regions, Saskatchewan** (Natl. Mus. Bull. No. 120, 1950). Godfrey also refers to a sight record by J. S. Dexter at La Ronge prior to 1922.

Further information is found in **The Birds of the Saskatchewan River** (Houston & Street, 1959) as follows:

Prince Albert: Mr. Chael of Chael Lake, Henribourg, once described a bird to me which could not have been anything else than a Western Tanager. I never saw one near Prince Albert. (It was not uncommon at Emma Lake, just north of this district.) (Furniss.)

Cumberland House: Three seen June 18, 1958, in high poplars at the Hudson Bay fur lease headquarters cabin, three miles upstream from Pemmican Portage, on the old channel of the Saskatchewan River. There were two males and one female, with one of the former in bright plumage and the other with a less vivid red on his head. The birds were watched for ten minutes on two occasions with 7x50 binoculars, by Mary Houston, T. E. Larsen, Russell Robertson and this writer. This is the easternmost record for this latitude. (Houston).

Nipawin: Rather rare summer resident. Noted locally on the east side of the Saskatchewan River, from Nipawin South to the Nipawin Rapids, during nine of the past fourteen summers. A nest with four eggs was found at the end of a spruce bough 20 feet from the ground, half a mile south of Nipawin Union Hospital on July 1, 1945. After the young had left, the nest was collected by Fred G. Bard of the Saskatchewan Museum of Natural History, Regina (Can. Field-Nat., 61:67, 1947). Matthews once saw one at their farm, a little over a mile east of the river, and an adult was seen on one occasion at the writer's residence, in Nipawin, Sept. 3, 1954. (Street).

The most recent report from northern Saskatchewan is that given by R. W. Nero in **Birds of the Lake Athabasca Region, Saskatchewan** (1963). A pair, apparently breeding, was seen at Carswell Lake, south of Lake Athabasca, on July 14, 1962.

All of the above records are either within or on the fringe of the Canadian zone where it appears that the bird is a rare summer resident. Birds that migrate to central Saskatchewan undoubtedly pass through the transition zone; it may be that the birds pass quickly over the south and rarely stop unless forced down by extreme weather conditions. Whatever the explanation, I have been able to find only a very few records for the southern (transition) zone of the province. In correspondence with Steve Mann recently I learned that he saw what he is reasonably sure was a Western Tanager near his home at Skull Creek in the fall of 1917. The other sight records for southern Saskatchewan belong to the years 1961 and 1962, with the Broadview specimen record for 1963. In 1961 an observation was submitted to **Audubon Field Notes** (15:421) from Estevan [one seen by Ross Lein, May 21, 1961], and for 1962 **Audubon Field Notes** (16:426) reported one male at Regina "seen by at least two observers" on May 18, and observations in Moose Jaw on May 22 and May 28. Because of the scarcity of previous records for the southern part of the province, and because the 1961-62 records were sight observations by amateur observers, the 1963 specimen record from Broadview is of particular importance.

CHANGES IN THE NEST SITE OF THE HOUSE SPARROW

by John Lane, Brandon

In setting out nest boxes for Tree Swallows and bluebirds, our Brandon Junior Birders are faced with the problem of competition from House Sparrows for nest sites. From our four years of experience, we have learned a lot about where or where not to set up nest boxes. However, when changes in habitat cause House Sparrows to move, the Junior Birders often find that their carefully-placed nest boxes are once again taken over by House Sparrows.

A case in point was the tearing down of the huge CPR coal dock at Broadview. Readers who are acquainted with this type of structure will know what a haven they were for sparrows, with countless nooks and crannies in which they could build their nests. When the Broadview dock was torn down, I found House Sparrows in possession of our nest boxes half a mile, one mile, and two miles east of Broadview. All these nest boxes had housed Mountain Bluebirds in 1962, so it was a real blow to find House Sparrows in possession.

On farms, too, the disappearance of old barns is forcing House Sparrows to seek new nest sites. During the winter of 1961-62 the Brandon Junior Birders received permission to set out a series of nest boxes on the J. Friesen farm, one and one-half miles west of Griswold, Manitoba. The results in 1962 were entirely successful: in the 12 boxes that were put out, 11 pairs of Tree Swallows and one pair of Mountain Bluebirds nested. This spring the Friesens tore down their old cattle barn, thus depriving the local tribe of House Sparrows of their long-time nesting site. When we checked this summer, we found that no less than nine pairs of House Sparrows had moved from the farmstead and taken up residence in our nest boxes. Only one pair of Tree Swallows had survived the invasion, and two nest boxes were missing, probably knocked down by cattle. It was necessary to rebuild two and move 11 to new localities in a renewed attempt to escape the sparrows.