



A male Scarlet Tanager.

Photo by Greg Smith.

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The Scarlet Tanager Wake-up Call

It's July 1. My eyes open. I guess it is 5:17, reach for my phone, then confirm it. The day before, I had awoken at the same minute – and, within a minute or two, several days in a row before that, too. I don't necessarily want to start my day so early. I could go back to sleep for another hour or two; Lord knows I need it, but I won't. My thoughts won't let me.

Could this be the last morning that I am awakened by this alarm - this song? Merely knowing the end is inevitably near prompts increasing wakefulness, mindfulness to relish each burry, yet, melodious phrase of notes. Tomorrow, or perhaps the next morning or a week from now the song will cease. After that, almost a year, and very possibly longer - very possibly *never* - will I be awakened in this manner again.

I rise and make my way through shades of gray toward the kitchen. Nearly every window is open. The repetitive lilt spills into the house through each one that I pass. In this way, amid the absence of other sounds at this calm crepuscular hour, our living space is momentarily immersed in pure stereo by the song of the Scarlet Tanager.

Early birds of several other species join the chorus: the Northern Cardinal across the street; the Eastern Bluebird in our neighbor's yard; the Song Sparrow that occupies the strip of overgrowth on the south side of our yard; the American Robin over the lawn on the north side of the yard. With the passage of minutes, more species join the daybreak orchestra. Since each of them occupies a perch further from the house, they serve as back-up vocals to the lead singer.

Although I can't see it I am well aware of the Scarlet Tanager's favorite singing perch – a leafy sprig atop the crown of the tall Pignut Hickory. Being the most frequent of many singing perches throughout a several-acre territory, I've got to believe that its mate and nest, replete with maturing nestlings, is hidden behind a leafy shroud not far below.

The tree has been stationed at the front of the driveway since well before we moved here in 1989. The dense, bushy canopy extends across the driveway and over the lawn not far from our front door. In effect, the Tanager sings from a position almost directly over our roof. It has vocally started the bare start of

every day for the past seven weeks from this exact location. When weather dictates that our windows be closed... no matter. Its song - though substantially muffled - can still be heard throughout the house.

To recognize the Scarlet Tanager's breeding song, it is helpful to note the similarity in cadence to that of the much more commonly heard American Robin. Some field guides offer the Robin's word-handle as a flute-like *cheer up, cheerily, cheer up, cheer up... cheer up, cheer up, cheerily, cheer up...*, and so on. The same words at about the same pace can be applied to the Tanager's song with a special distinction: the notes are raspy, not flutey; some birders say, *Like a Robin with a sore throat*. It also frequently emits another two-note phrase, delivered either separate from the breeding song or incorporated with it: an emphatic *chick-burr!*

Upon awakening, as the eastern sky begins to brighten, a male songbird - literally, before it does anything else - has a penchant to seek a favorite perch usually not very far from the nest and sing its heart out. Why is 'first light' from mid-spring to early summer so alive with bird song? Every male bird - along with its mate within some stage of its breeding cycle - is compelled to reaffirm in its species-specific voice its occupancy and defense of this given plot of land. It will do so religiously - like morning prayers - until its young have grown and flown. Ornithologists refer to it as the *dawn song*, but from my experience the crescendo has already passed by the time the sun's rays crack the horizon.

Our Scarlet Tanager's dawn song is generously punctuated with 'chick-burrs.' Indeed, after nearly every string of five to seven 'cheer up - cheerily' phrases, it skips a beat, delivers a 'chick-burr,' skips another beat, then moves on to the next set of 'cheer ups.' It sings thus, exclusively, from the high Hickory perch.

Some thirty minutes later the song abruptly ceases. Although the air is now substantially brighter than when the Tanager had first started to sing, actual 'dawn' is still about fifteen minutes away. It has vacated the perch, on its way to gleaning breakfast - insects, largely lepidopteran larvae - from the foliage of the mature deciduous trees in the immediate vicinity. The home range includes our entire yard and spills onto the properties of all our adjacent neighbors. The Tanager has nestlings to provide for, as well. It wouldn't be singing if it didn't.

A short while later, I step out the back nature center door and onto the patio. To my left the Tanager's song floods the air again. Now it is situated atop another preferred singing post - the old, tall Wild Black Cherry in the dense tree line that separates us from our neighbors to the north. Not surprisingly, it is the highest perch on that side of the yard, but foliage often blocks my view of the bird.

Another preferred perch, not coincidentally, is the highest point across our lawn within the tree line to the south. The topmost branches of an old female Eastern Cottonwood tower at least thirty feet above the mix of subclimax Boxelders, Cherries, Elms, Aspens, and Walnuts that comprise the rest of the line. The bird may sing from a dozen or more high perches around this small breeding domain throughout the day, but these three particular treetops, in combination, seem to be the pulpits of choice for over half of its singing stints.



The Scarlet Tanager chooses the highest perches from which to sing; here atop the crown of the cottonwood.

Apologies to the Cardinal, but the Scarlet Tanager is arguably, the most brilliant songbird to grace Michigan forests. When the sun is low on the east or west horizon and the rays strike a treetop Tanager's

feathers, the bird lights like a red beacon from the crest of the canopy. To cite a phrase from *Rudolph*, you could even say it glows.

Yet, most of the time when I hear one in our yard or elsewhere I don't necessarily feel an urge to set eyes on it. Through a lifetime of birding I've spied one up close through binoculars hundreds of times. To this day, however, whenever I hear one singing, (like dozens of times here each day of late) my mind instantly and always conjures an image of that brilliance. Just knowing it is there, alive, gracing the woods with vocal and visual beauty, fulfilling its functional role in the ecosystem, working to produce tomorrow's generation of Tanagers, fills me with a quiet thrill and comfort. The comfort, however, is a measured one.



A camera aimed through the spotting scope offers a close-up of the Scarlet Tanager bathed in the western sun's rays. It likes to sing from the highest perch on our property – the topmost limb of an old female Eastern Cottonwood.

I mentioned at the column's onset that this Tanager's song would inevitably cease, and soon. It is a *breeding* song, used specifically to first announce claim to a certain woodland territory prior to the nesting cycle and a perhaps to attract a mate. The song is sung up to and over one hundred times each day through cumulative weeks, the duration of which encompasses nest-building, egg-laying, incubation, and ultimately, nestling growth. Some seven weeks or so since 'first announcement' back in mid-May the male will have sung the burry song many thousands of times.

Then, on a given day in early July the drably-hued young fledge. The frequency of the male's song is sharply curtailed. The dawn song ceases altogether. Its purpose has passed. Within a few days the young that successfully fledged become competent flyers and can follow their parents anywhere within, then beyond the defined several-acre perimeter, begging to be fed all along the way. The vocally-defended nesting territory is officially dissolved.

Based on the weeks-long duration of this male's song, this is the first Tanager pair to endure throughout the nesting process since we moved here near the end of the 80s - and likely the first such pair for many decades prior to that. Before now, the deciduous forest on and around our property was just too successional young to support this forest nesting species. After all, over seventy years ago this was a working farm. The front portion of our expanded home is the original two-story crackerbox farmhouse built in 1889.



A female Scarlet Tanager. Photo by Greg Smith.

Over our first twenty years here I only encountered Scarlet Tanagers in glimpses as they passed during migration in May and early September; here today, gone tomorrow. However, beginning about ten years or so ago, almost annually, a male Tanager would show up in late May, fly from one treetop to the next singing the territorial song day after day for about a week or ten days, then vanish.

Was he considering this habitat as mature enough to give breeding a go, then advertising for an unattached female to join him? If females are more discerning in regard to suitable breeding habitat than males, perhaps after a week of trying he just couldn't convince any members of the

opposite sex to take a gamble on this subclimax, subprime real estate. So, he gave up and moved on to try somewhere else. Now, this particular Tanager pair has demonstrated to us that the subclimax forest here has matured sufficiently such that they can take a viable shot at successful reproduction.

Over the past week the male's singing has waned. It will cease altogether any day now. I'm certain the young have departed the nest.

Fledglings of most all songbirds are typically noisy as they impatiently wait from a perch for food to be delivered, or later, as they follow the foraging parents while begging to be fed. I heard a fledgling Oriole begging from the upper branches of a Mulberry tree on the back of our lawn. Orioles as well as Tanagers will feed on the fruit of this tree and even lead their young to it. Having never had Tanagers breeding here before, I'm unfamiliar with a fledgling Tanager's voice. An internet check yielded no recordings. There is a distinct possibility too, that despite completion of the cycle, *no* Tanager fledglings exited the nest.

The Scarlet Tanager is a common host of the Brown-headed Cowbird – a brood parasite that slips its eggs into the nests of other species of songbirds. Woodland nesting tropical migrants like the Tanager are especially vulnerable.

Cowbirds are dwellers of open spaces. An aerial snapshot of a typical rural landscape in Lower Michigan reveals small patches of forest bordered and intersected by croplands, roads, utility rights-of-way and backyards purposely maintained to preserve early successional plant growth (read *lawns*). Cowbirds easily penetrate these woodlots and locate the nests of Tanagers, along with those of other long-distance migrants like Vireos, Warblers and Flycatchers.

A female Cowbird will slip onto the songbird's nest, toss one of the host's eggs overboard, lay its own egg and be gone in seconds. Cowbird nestings are aggressive feeders and often outcompete the host bird's remaining nestlings for the food provided by parents. If two cowbird eggs are laid and hatch, all of the host bird's offspring perish. The host species finishes the nesting cycle unsuspectingly feeding fledgling Cowbirds instead of its own.



A female Brown-headed Cowbird is the epitome of 'non-descript.'
Photo by Greg Smith.

These Tanagers migrated thousands of miles from overwintering grounds in perhaps Belize or Colombia to settle and nest here for the summer. Come late August when they begin their migration back to the tropics there is a distinct possibility that for all their effort, they've raised nothing but Cowbirds. This is but one scenario in which humanity has thrown a wrench into a bird's ability to survive from one generation to the next.

Tanagers as well as so many other migrant songbirds need abundant insect availability to fuel their migration and to raise their young. Yet, locally and worldwide significant declines in insect abundance are nothing short of glaring and alarming. Habitat loss and climate change factor into the equation but insecticide usage and potency are on the rise.

Here are two links worth a read and heed:

Insect Freefall: What Does It Mean for Birds?

https://abcbirds.org/blog/insect-freefall/?gad_source=1&gad_campaignid=713124682&gbraid=0AAAAADdd1mVPvpLBMYYotnPgtD-qDqenWg&gclid=CjwKCAjwprjDBhBTEiwA1m1d0vAVqaasx5kibi7OI8YEUzaze_ftHP_WbddbEFa-DQZG0nnUyWheahoCFHwQAvD_BwE

Insects Matter. Why Are We Wiping Them Out?

<https://earth.org/insects-matter-so-why-are-we-wiping-them-out/>

I can only hope that the Scarlet Tanagers will back to attempt to breed here again next spring; but given the combined, escalating human-afflicted affairs above, it would be foolish for me to take for granted that they will be, either next year or in any years to follow. Unless we change our attitude quickly toward how we relate to the physical and living environment around us, Rachel Carson's unthinkable prediction sixty years ago may finally come home to roost.

- Jim McGrath

Around the State in July

- ❖ Saturday, July 1: 4:30-7:30pm. MI Reptiles & Amphibians Exhibit, Troy Public Library.
- ❖ Saturday, July 5: 2-5pm. MI Reptiles & Amphibians Exhibit; Ludington State Park.
- ❖ Tuesday, July 10: 7pm. MI Butterfly & Moth Larvae Presentation, Benzie Audubon Club, Frankfort.
- ❖ Saturday, July 13: 10am-2pm. MI Turtles Exhibit; Williamston Farm & Artisan Market, Williamston.
- ❖ Tuesday, July 15: 1pm & 3pm. MI Camouflaged Wildlife; Petoskey District Library.
- ❖ Saturday, July 26: 10am-3pm. MI Reptiles & Amphibians Exhibit; Grindstone Port Hope Sportsmen's Club Youth Day, Port Hope.
- ❖ Thursday, July 31: 10:30am. MI Wildlife Presentation; Whittemore Public Library.
- ❖ Thursday, July 31: 2pm. MI Wildlife Presentation; Hale Public Library, Plainfield.

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Luna



Cecropia

Four larvae of one species with detailed care instructions, only \$15.

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***Suggested Minimum Donation:
\$5/person/hour***

The sky's the limit for natural science learning here – with a Michigan twist! Adults, couples and individual families are welcome to schedule an intimate indoor or outdoor visit to what we call “The Biggest Little Nature Center in Michigan,” and “Home to the Largest Zoo of Michigan-native Reptiles and Amphibians.” The unique, in-person, hands-on experiences here are unrivaled at any other nature center or zoo! We will bring snakes, turtles, frogs and salamanders out of tanks to interact with adults or students of any age or grade-level.

Identify and feed “the grand slam of Michigan turtles” - all ten species native to our state as they swim and bask in pools on the patio! Meet, pet and feed “Milberta”, our hungry Red-footed tortoise.



Handle any or all of Michigan's three species of garter snakes while learning how to tell them apart, then watch them gobble up worms and frogs. Hold or “wear” a gentle 6-foot Black Ratsnake – the largest in the state!

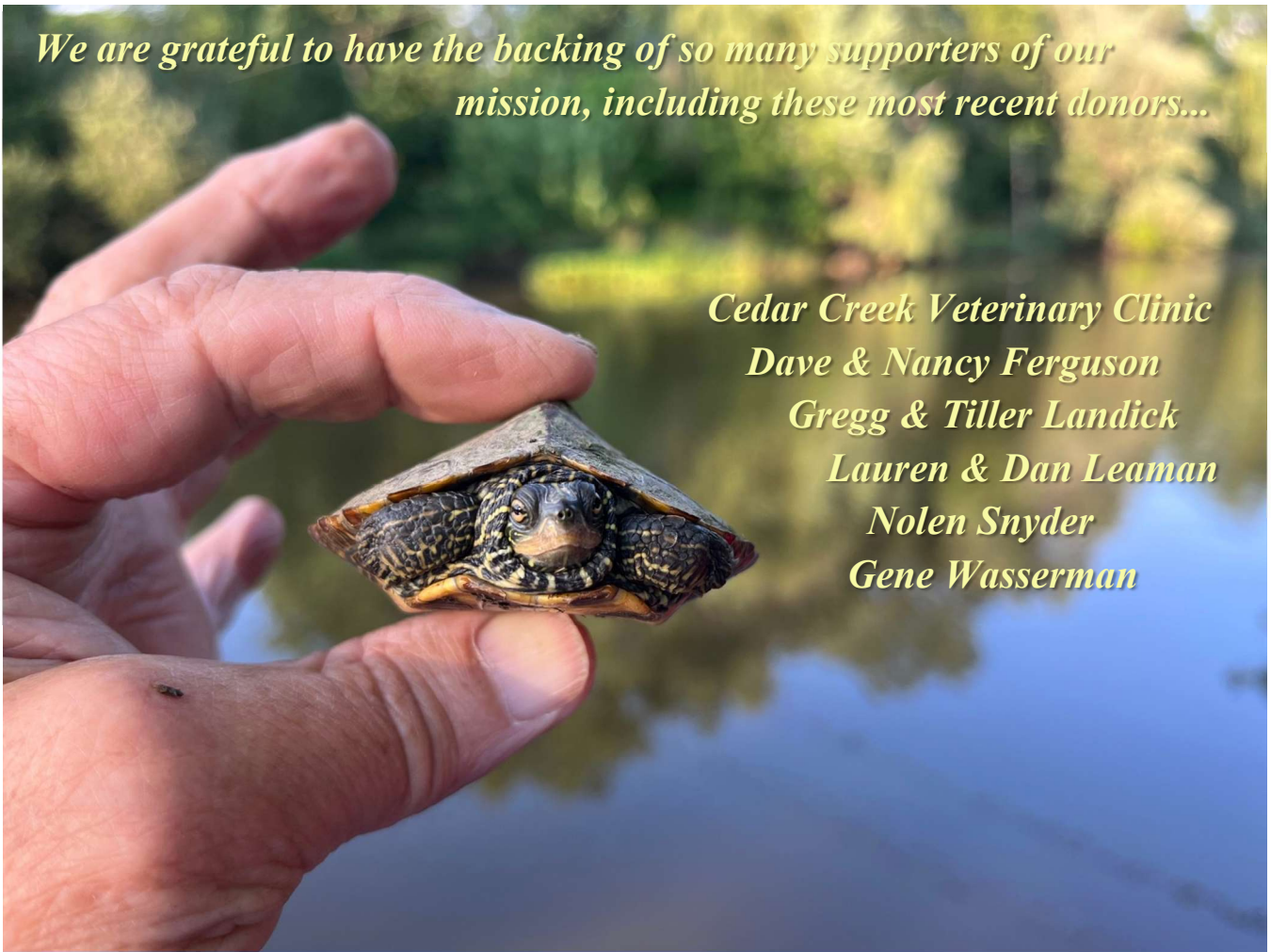
Many more snakes, turtles, frogs and salamanders to identify and feed. Identify birds at the feeders. Take a guided walk on our trails to identify breeding birds by their songs.

See our ‘farm’ of huge Luna, Polyphemus and Cecropia Moth caterpillars, and even arrange to take some home to raise on your own.

Ask about special guided birding outings and nature walks at a natural area of your or our choosing!

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*Cedar Creek Veterinary Clinic
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Nolen Snyder
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More Reading for Concerned Americans

https://www.nytimes.com/2025/07/08/climate/trump-climate-energy-department.html?campaign_id=54&emc=edit_clim_20250713&instance_id=158410&nl=climate-forward®i_id=97652655&segment_id=201790&user_id=e2b8dd8c9b543fb8c35d5dd30658067e

https://insideclimatenews.org/news/08072025/climate-change-helped-fuel-heavy-rains-that-led-to-devastating-texas-flood/?utm_source=InsideClimate+News&utm_campaign=b65cabf3fb-EMAIL_CAMPAIGN_2025_07_12_01_10&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_29c928ffb5-b65cabf3fb-327904609

https://www.nytimes.com/2025/07/13/climate/floods-trump-cuts-disaster-preparedness-fema.html?campaign_id=54&emc=edit_clim_20250713&instance_id=158410&nl=climate-forward®i_id=97652655&segment_id=201790&user_id=e2b8dd8c9b543fb8c35d5dd30658067e

—JM

The next generation would be justified in looking back at us and asking, “What were you thinking? Couldn’t you hear what the scientists were saying? Couldn’t you hear what Mother Nature was screaming at you?” – Al Gore

I don’t want you to be hopeful. I want you to panic. I want you to feel the fear I feel every day. I want you to act. I want you to act like you would in a crisis. I want you to act like your house is on fire, because it is. – Greta Thunberg

The personal actions that cut climate pollution fast are to go flight-, car-, and meat-free. Start with the one that feels most feasible for you; if you can’t totally go without, aim to cut your consumption today at least in half. – Kimberly Nicholas, Under the Sky We Make

What if we had storytelling mechanisms that said it is important that you know about the well-being of wildlife in your neighborhood? – Robin Wall Kimmerer

Study nature, love nature, stay close to nature. It will never fail you. – Frank Lloyd Wright



Statewideindivisiblemi.com



Earth911.com



insideclimatenews.org

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