

Tanagers

by Martin Vince
Wichita, Kansas

Even to the most unenthusiastic aviculturist, the name tanager usually conjures up an image of beauty and excitement; a name enveloping a range of New World birds so complex that some have only recently joined the sub-family.

Peters describes the sub-family *Thraupinae* as possessing 242 species. Within that number there are many species familiar in themselves but perhaps not so often thought of as tanagers, e.g., dacnis, honeycreepers, flowerpiercers, euphonias, chlorophonias, the Orangequit and the Giant Conebill. And some taxonomists also include 10 additional conebills usually placed with *Parulidae* (the New World warblers) as well as the Swallow Tanager, often to be found in the monotypic sub-family *Tersininae*.

So diverse is this spectrum of birds that there is literally something there for everyone; a morphological range that offers insectivores, frugivores and nectivores. Traditionally, the more commonly available species have been those of the genera *Tangara* and *Thraupis*. Such birds are easy to cater for and sometimes stunningly beautiful. For these basic reasons they have always been a favorite with aviculturists.

One of the commonest species, the Blue-gray Tanager, *Thraupis episcopus*, is arguably the epitome of tanager hardiness. Its keenness to eat a varied diet makes it easy to cater for and once acclimated it is strong, being able to live in temperate climates without heat. Its exuberance makes it enjoyable to observe, although, sometimes the line between joie de vivre and aggression can become blurred. If so motivated a Blue-gray Tanager can comfortably harass a bird twice its size, as can the equally strong Silver-beaked Tanager, *Ramphocelus carbo* and Magpie Tanager, *Cissopis leveriana*.

Moving towards the more gentle end of the spectrum, species such as the Paradise and Blue-necked tanagers, *Tangara chilensis* and *Tangara cyanicollis*, are strikingly more beautiful than the aforementioned. But these scintillating beauties require a slightly more experi-

enced hand since *Tangara* tanagers are generally less hardy than *Thraupis* species. Even so, acclimated birds will live outside during the warmer months, although will require heated winter accommodation. *Tangaras* will live in mixed company with other birds of a similar size, only occasionally displaying aggression and usually only in the breeding season. However, unlike some of the more robust tanagers, those *Tangara* displays of aggression I have seen have been short lived and confined to the defense of a nest.

So far, I have mentioned a few species that are fairly easy to maintain. A couple more steps up the husbandry ladder and one might find the Orange-eared Tanager, *Chlorochrysa calliparaea*; drab green but rare and more demanding than those already described. Perhaps writing about it is only of academic interest since few are kept in captivity. Nevertheless, it is worth recording a few points should the reader be fortunate enough to obtain any specimens.

Perhaps the most surprising aspect of its husbandry is the species' need for higher temperatures than one would expect. For reasons that are not obvious, it is quite delicate. Protection from dampness and drafts is especially important and to be on the safe side temperatures in excess of 20°C (68 °F) should be aimed for. As with tanagers in general, a well-planted aviary will offer the best chances of breeding, as well as plenty of hiding places - something this species appears to particularly need. It is certainly more shy than most tanagers, and, although I have never tried, it would probably not thrive if housed with larger species or even more boisterous birds of equal size.

The one pair of Orange-cheeked Tanagers I have kept were housed in an aviary so densely planted that they were almost invisible. But that was all to the good since breeding was hoped for. Positioned around the aviary were nesting receptacles of every conceivable design. As it happened, the birds did not nest in any of these but instead started building a nest only 1½ m. (5 ft) from the ground

within a dense bush. Anxious to remain hidden, the birds had chosen a site impossible to see except upon very close inspection. Many nesting materials were provided, but by far the most popular were strands of moss. These were interwoven with grasses and some short lengths of wool. Very disappointingly, only half way through its construction the nest building was stopped. But even an aborted nesting attempt for this species is rare and worth reporting.

The Orange-cheeked Tanager is highly insectivorous, caring little for the fruits that are a staple for many tanagers. Undoubtedly it is this insectivorous nature that makes it more difficult to keep. But with a good quality insectivorous diet, incorporating plenty of live food, such birds can be maintained successfully. Its relatively large bill is certainly less discerning than that of a nuthatch or tit for example. Although fruits are not relished, it is a good idea to include a small measure - about 20% of the total diet - since in the wild an occasional berry or mouthful of fruit will be eaten. To prevent the birds picking out their favorite foods, fruits, insects and all should be mixed together and offered in a single dish, thereby encouraging the birds to consume a balanced diet.

Tanagers have been a feature of aviculture for over 100 years but still *Thraupinae* clings to many secrets and perhaps even undiscovered species. It is for us all to unravel those secrets so that we might better understand the rich natural world we live in. ➤

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