



# Tangara TANAGERS

...Dazzling gems from the South American rainforests

Author and copyright: Cyril Laubscher  
Orpington, Kent, England

## Introduction

Tanagers have fascinated me since 1961 when I saw my first live specimens of this large family, comprising 240+ species. Inhabitants of rain and cloud forest, the brilliantly colored tanagers are mainly confined to the tropical and subtropical regions of the Americas. Most species are to be seen in South America, with a few species extending their range into Central America and Mexico.

Only four species are migratory – the four *Piranga* spp. that breed in the USA migrate southwards for the winter. The rest are non-migratory and largely sedentary, with only slight altitudinal movements in search of food.

## Ornithological Observations and Notes

Many tanagers are rather lacking in color, but others are unbelievably beautiful, especially some of the 48 species of the genus *Tangara*. These denizens of rainforest and other thickly wooded areas are the most brilliantly colored and diverse in color pattern. As they have little or no true song, their beauty is mainly in the coloring. In size, they range between 4.4-6 inch-

es (11-15 cm) and the sexes are generally alike. Different species of tanagers can often be seen forming mixed parties with various insectivorous birds, which then work their way through the canopies of trees, feeding mainly on insects and fruit. Insects are gleaned from the underside of leaves and crevices in trees. Bromeliads are home to insects that are much sought after by tanagers, and they can often be seen probing in the leafy structure and flowers. It is enthralling to see these mixed parties operating, and to see how diligently they work from tree to tree.

The question as to how and why different species of tanagers can work together in these mixed parties – when presumably they are competing for the same food source – is easily explained through observation. Some tanagers eat more fruit, while others are more insectivorous, and a few are almost wholly insectivorous. Significantly, one species will seek insects under leaves, another feeds on insects found in thin moss covered branches, and, the crevices in trees and branches is the feeding place for a third species, while

a fourth may seek insects in bromeliads etc. etc. In this manner, each species almost has its own ecological niche, and does not necessarily compete directly with another species!

While photographing with a team of scientists working on a rainforest project in Colombia during 1991, I had an opportunity to study various tanagers in different locations. In the Anchicayá River valley, a hot and humid rain forest area situated some 40-50 km east of Buenaventura, a number of interesting species, including Scarlet and White Tanagers *Erythrothlypis salmoni*, Silver-throated Tanager *Tangara icterocephala*, and Golden-hooded Tanager *T. larvata*, were seen accompanying honeycreepers, warblers, banaquits, dacnis, and various insectivorous species. By forming small parties, it was more beneficial for all birds involved as, collectively, they were able to disturb more insects which would then be snapped up readily. Some search "head down" beneath branches and leaves. Food plants are predominantly various species of *Cecropia* and *Miconia*, the fruits of which feature in the daily intake of *Tangara* species.

Down in the valley, about 300 feet (100 meters) above sea-level, Lemon-rumped Tanagers *Ramphocelus icteronotus* used to feed greedily on cooked rice brought down from the canteen of the hydro-electric project by the workers, and placed on a stone wall built on top of the river bank. This omnivorous feeding habit, even in the wild, extends into aviculture where species of the *Ramphocelus* genus are equally omnivorous and will adapt more readily to an artificial diet than some of the other genera.

Nesting in the wild is unpredictable because of the climatic variations in the distribution area of certain species. Silver-throated Tanagers breed around January and February, as well as October at the hydroelectric project in the lower Anchicayá River valley, while further up the valley near Cali, at approximately 1000 meters above sea level, the same species has been recorded breeding in June. Silver-throated Tanagers build a mossy cup-shaped nest, usually placed in a bush



Photo by Cyril Laubscher

Black-eared Golden Tanager (*Tangara arthus*).



*Buff-naped Tanager* (*Tanagera ruficervix*).

or tree between 2-12 meters up. The normal clutch is two whitish eggs with heavy brown mottling.

Another species that breeds in the upper Anchicayá River valley between April and September is the Golden or Black-eared Golden Tanager *T. arthus*.

### Notes on Selected Tanager Species

The Blue-necked Tanager *T. cyanicollis* has long been a favorite in aviculture. This wide-ranging species is found in Venezuela, Colombia, Ecuador, Peru, Bolivia, and Brazil. Regularly imported and reasonably priced, it is an ideal species to begin with, as individuals are quite hardy when acclimatized. They are likely to breed if a true pair is obtained.

The Bay-headed Tanager *T. gyrola* has an interesting color pattern and is a highly desirable bird. This species will breed in aviaries if suitable plants are available. Found in humid and wet forest in lowlands of mountains ranging from Costa Rica, south to Colombia, Ecuador, northern Bolivia and Amazonian Brazil.

The attractive blue coloring of the Buff-naped Tanager *T. ruficervix* offsets the golden-buff color of the nape. In the wild, this species eats more fruit than insects and ranges along the Andes from Colombia, Ecuador, and eastern Peru to Bolivia. It is not seen in aviculture as often as some other

species.

Frequently seen in humid forest, the Silver-throated Tanager consumes mostly fruit, but forages for insects on slender moss-covered branches. This species is distributed from Costa Rica, Panama, southward to Colombia and Ecuador. It is a widely kept tanager that is ideal to start with as it is easily managed when acclimatized.

Another ideal species is the Black-eared Golden Tanager. Nine subspecies are currently recognized, with some

subspecies being brighter than others. Always popular, this easy to keep species is reasonably hardy when acclimatized. It ranges from Colombia to Venezuela, and southwards to Bolivia.

### Avicultural Notes

The *Tanagera* genus is the most popular group of tanagers in aviculture. Most species do well in aviculture, after careful quarantining and provided that they are housed in suitably warm, humid accommodation with a minimum temperature varying between 55-64°F (13-18°C). The minimum temperature is dependent on the individual species requirements. A greenhouse is ideal but access to a planted aviary is an added advantage, as the birds then have a choice where they prefer to be in the warm summer months. Some aviculturists keep them in cages, but this should only be on a temporary basis. They thrive better - and should breed - if kept in a warm sheltered aviary in the summer months, with access to an indoor flight, which can then be heated in winter.

With no visual sexual difference evident in any of the *Tanagera* species, this is one drawback in terms of breeding them in aviaries. While regular breeding does occur, the number of young that are reared is insignificant. This means



*Blue-headed Tanager* (*Tanagera cyanicollis*).

that there will probably never be a sustainable and viable breeding population for the future for any of the species, unless a determined effort is made through specialized breeding. With exports already banned in a number of South American countries - including Brazil where a number of the most beautiful species are found - it means that a more determined effort is needed to breed a small nucleus of captive-bred tanagers.

Providing a planted aviary, with reasonably sized bushes and creepers, will greatly improve the chance of breeding success for a potential breeding pair. Plant fibers and lengthy bits of growing moss on branches (as can be seen in damp places or forested areas), may well stimulate the birds into breeding. When the birds begin incubating, then it is the right time to start ensuring a plentiful supply of live food is available, as it should take about 12-14 days for young to hatch and without sufficient live food, successful rearing is unlikely to occur.

A female Bay-headed Tanager is shown on her nest in one of the photographs accompanying this article. The photograph was taken while she was breeding in one of my aviaries in South Africa in 1978. The female had been obtained while still in immature

plumage as can be seen from the head color when compared to the full-colored male. The male illustrated was the sire of the single youngster that was reared to independence from the nesting. Unfortunately, the youngster succumbed shortly after, probably due to some illness contracted after a prolonged tropical thunderstorm that is a feature of the summer rainfall in the Johannesburg area.

The cup-shaped nest that the female built was suspended in creepers hanging from the roof of the well-planted aviary. Plenty of live food was available from within the aviary, and this made all the difference, as I only had to supplement a small amount of other live food from outside, which was collected in fields near my house. Swiping a net from side to side while walking through the weeds, produced a surprising amount of small insects, which were placed in the aviary for the parents to capture and feed to the youngster.

Two of the other tanagers depicted - the Black-eared Golden and the Buff-naped Tanager were two single tanagers that were housed in adjoining aviaries. The tanager species illustrated are representative of the *Tangara* group that is normally available to aviculturists. At various stages, I have kept all five species.

Diet for tanagers is very important and they must have as much variety of fresh soft fruit as can be obtained in season - grapes cut in half, soaked or

fresh figs, pear, banana (feed sparingly as it can be fattening), oranges, prickly pear (cactus fruit), papaya, and most other soft tropical fruits can be offered. Not all of the fruit will be to their liking but the birds will soon let you know what they prefer. Fruit can be fed cut in half, or diced. Sponge cake soaked with a little honey water or nectar is taken readily, but feed this as a treat. If nectar-feeding species are housed with tanagers, they will consume nectar, but it is not necessary for them to have nectar regularly. In fact, it could have an adverse effect, as they will take the nectar in preference to the regular fruit and insectivorous mixture. Hard-boiled egg can be mashed and offered separately or mixed in among the insectivorous food. Softbill pellets are now readily available in the USA and can be fed to tanagers. Waxworms and mini-mealworms are suitable live food, and any wild insects, smooth caterpillars and spiders can be given.

#### References

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Bay-headed Tanager (Tangara gyrola) female incubating eggs.

Bay-headed Tanager male.



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