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from
the field . . .

by Jack Clinton-Eitnrear
San Antonio, Texas

Crimson-collared Tanager

As the tropical sun rose on the horizon, silhouettes of aracarís filled the top of a nearby leafless tree. Soon flocks of parrots would fly overhead and the roar of the howler monkey would further confirm the beginning of a new day in the American tropics.

Shortly after the sun climbed above the hardwood forest, flashes of red could be seen along its border. After giving the matter some attention, those flashes proved to be due to a mixed flock of foraging scarlet-rumped (*Ramphocelus passerinii*) and crimson-collared (*Phlogothraupis sanguinolenta*) tanagers.

The male scarlet-rumped tanager is black with a scarlet rump and blue beak. The female is a rather drab olive-brown.

Like the crimson-collared, it is found from southeastern Mexico through Central America into Panama. The life history of the scarlet-rumped has been well documented whereas the crimson-collared's taxonomy and ecology remain still a bit of a mystery. Despite several hours of silent observation the flock of crimson-collared tanagers feeding in the tall grasses at the forest border, near Palenque archaeological ruins in Chiapas, Mexico, unveiled little as to their habits.

Unlike the scarlet-rumped tanager the male and female crimson-collared tanagers are both brightly marked. The bright red hood and rump is contrasted by its velvety black body. To top the striking pattern off its eyes are blood red



Nest of the crimson-collared tanager.

Photo by Jack Clinton-Eitnrear

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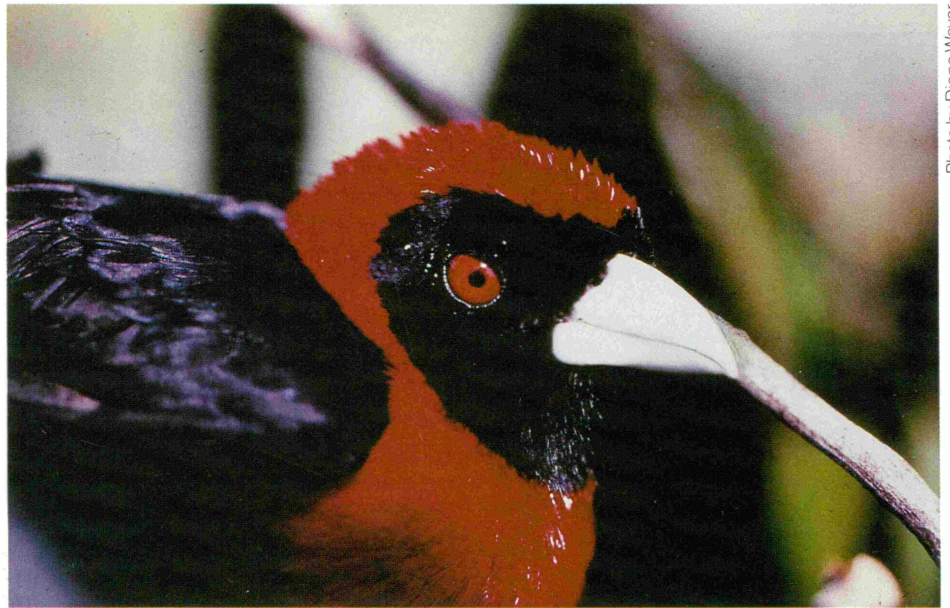
The author examines a crimson-collared tanager captured in a mist net.

in coloration. Other birds are red and black but the oil-like gloss of this tanager's coloration makes it like no other avian species.

A month later, while conducting some field studies in the Chiquibul Forest Reserve of Belize, another crimson "flash" crossed my path. This time it was a pair, not a mixed flock, so the possibility of making some observations on its nesting appeared more hopeful. As only a handful of nests have been observed (none in the past 50 years!) documentation as to the species' behavior is important as it is frequently useful for determining taxonomic relationships with other tanagers. Morton Isler, co-editor of a recently published book on tanagers,* believes that the



Crimson-collared tanager



Close-up of the oil-like glossy coloration of the crimson-collared tanager. The brilliant coloration is accurately reflected by its Spanish name "Tongonito real" or royal tanager.

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The author photographing the nest of a crimson-collared tanager (*Pblogothaupis sanguinolenta*).

crimson-collared tanager is more restricted to areas near water than its frequent "compadre," the scarlet-rumped. My observations would certainly support his theory as just over the small hill was the Guacamayo River.

There are several reasons why so few nests of this species have been discovered. Despite being a very conspicuous bird it does an excellent job keeping well hidden while in its nest. When approaching the nest it enters the tree from below the nest and climbs up the tree from the inside. In our case the bird nested in a vine-covered prickly yellow tree (*Zanthoxylum sp.*) which in itself did an excellent job of hiding both nest and bird. Furthermore, the nest was constructed of living green moss with a fine grass, leaf and bark lining. According to Mr. Isler, tanagers living along creeks and rivers frequently use moss in their nests. I am reminded, however, of photographing a gray-headed tanager (*Eucometis penicillata*) the previous year along a forest stream with pool. Its nest had so few sticks you could see the eggs through the bottom of the nest! Incorporating moss into its nest was a smart move for the crimson-collared as brushy areas along rivers also provide shelter for a number of animals that love to consume birds' eggs.

Only days earlier the entire clutch from a nest of white-collared seedeaters (*Sporophila torqueola*) disappeared in the night likely due to such predators. Without the keen eyesight of my assistant, Steve McGehee, and a little just plain luck we never would have spotted this bird's nest even though we were less than 30 feet away from it for several months. Wedged into the fork of a 2.1 mm (in diameter) branch, the nest was 12.05 mm in diameter and 10.1 mm high. The diameter of the cup was only 7.85 mm with a height of 5.5 mm.

Although once imported into the United States I could find no record of the species currently being exhibited or ever to have bred in captivity. Tanagers as an avian group have not fared well in captivity. According to ISIS data from numerous U.S. zoos, 41 species are being maintained by those facilities with data in the ISIS computers. Of these, only 12 species note having some captive-bred individuals within the captive population. Of course, 12 species are represented by only one specimen so breeding, at the present anyway, appears rather unlikely.

Numerous articles have been published in the avicultural literature on the successful breeding of various tanagers.

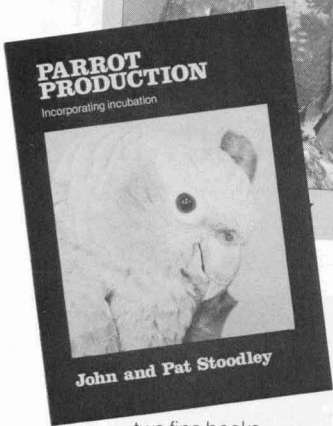
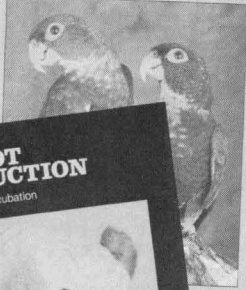
Risking oversimplification of the obviously complex breeding behavior of the crimson-collared tanager I feel we can gain some insight into what would be required to breed them by analyzing the successful propagation of several species in the related genus (*Rhamphocelus*).

The breeding of the maroon tanager (*R. cayana*) by W.H. Collard (*Avicultural Magazine* Vol. 70, No. 2, pg. 55, 1964) was achieved by putting the species in a mixed flock (of mainly African species) in an aviary measuring 36x16x9 feet. The pair was noted to feed mealworms, white ants and hard-boiled eggs to their young. With another related species, the crimson-backed tanager (*R. dimidiatus*), the author, Herbert Murray had little success until he moved the birds from their current enclosure of 8x4x7 to a larger flight (size not given). In addition to the increase in aviary size he noted that the previous year's young greatly assisted in the rearing of the current clutch. He therefore recommends that you do not remove young until the following year or when some obvious aggressive behavior develops (*Avicultural Magazine*, Vol. 74, No. 6, pgs. 202-203, 1968). A final species of *Rhamphocelus* tanager was bred by Mrs. K.M. Scamell (*Avicultural Magazine*, Vol. 76, No. 6, pgs. 216-218, 1970) in 1970. She housed her pair of lemon-rumped tanagers (*R. icteronotus*) in an aviary 15x3x6. She mentions feeding them mealworms and maggots. In all three situations the incubation period appears to be approximately 14 days with two egg clutches being the norm although three eggs are not uncommonly laid. Parental care is generally still required a few weeks to a month after the young fledge. A fairly large aviary (when compared to the size of the birds being housed), plenty of live food and a keen avicultural eye appears to be the key to breeding these delicate species.

Whether in the aviary or in the wild, the various colorful tanagers of the neotropics (218 species in total) not only play an important role in their respective ecosystems but add amazement and delight to all who view them. As the old phrase goes, "out of sight, out of mind!" Hopefully for the sake of aviculture and the future survival of wild populations of tanagers these strikingly brilliant birds will never go "out of sight" in captivity.

*The Tanagers: natural history, distribution and identification. Morton L. and Phyllis R. Isler, Smithsonian Institution Press (available in November 1986). ●

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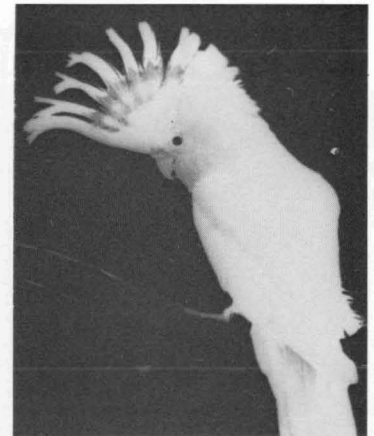
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