

Western Tanager



Many people reported to me that they saw a Western Tanager (WT) during the summer of 2010 (although I, unfortunately, did not). The WT is a lovely bird and is probably distinct enough to identify correctly (there is slight resemblance to an oriole, especially in the coloring). The WT is small to medium sized, 7.25 inches long, with a wing span of 11.5 inches and a relatively short tail and small bill. The breeding male has a bright orangish-red head, yellow body, black tail, and black wings with two distinct wing bars. The female is a dullish yellow with dark gray wings, back, and tail. The call of the WT is said to sound like a Robin with a sore throat. The WT is found throughout the western United States and western Canada during the summer. Winters are spent from central Mexico to Costa Rica. Migration is mostly at night, unfortunately resulting in birds being killed by collision with communication towers.

WTs prefer conifer and conifer-deciduous woodlands, mostly in the mountains. Males are highly territorial and are probably monogamous. Courtship displays include movements of wings and tail. A cup-like, flimsily lined nest is built in trees. The female spends most of her time on the nest and will stay there even when disturbed at close range. Three to five eggs hatch into helpless young, who develop quickly and fledge in 13 to 15 days. Both parents care for and feed the young. Food consists of insects which are picked from leaves and branches and berries. Some insects are caught on the wing.

According to the Cornell Lab of Ornithology, the red pigment in the face of the Western Tanager is rhodoxanthin, a pigment rare in birds. It is not manufactured by the bird, as are the pigments used by the other red tanagers. Instead, it must be acquired from the diet, presumably from insects that themselves acquire the pigment from plants.

-Pam Henline