

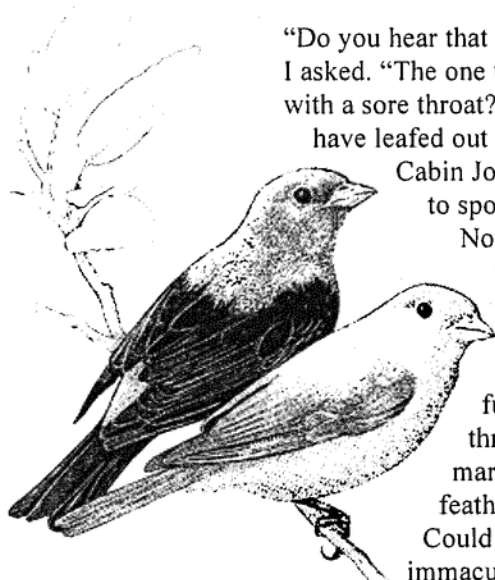
The Most Beautiful Bird in North America

“Do you hear that bird singing up in the trees?” I asked. “The one that sounds like a robin with a sore throat?” By May, after the oaks have leafed out in the deep forest along the Cabin John Creek Trail, the best way to spot the most beautiful bird in North America is to listen for it.

Once I located the singer, I waited for the male Scarlet Tanager to flit to another branch. When it landed in full sunlight, my wife looked through my binoculars to marvel at the molten crimson feathers set off by black wings. Could there be any bird with a more immaculate plumage?

I put this question in a slightly different manner to several top ornithologists: Can you name your top ten most attractive birds in the U.S? The result: the Scarlet Tanager was the runaway winner (only the male has the bright scarlet; the female, illustrated here with the male is a greenish-yellow). Yet surprisingly, eight of the 16 top-ranked species (there were several ties) are birds you might also see on a spring day along our stretch of the towpath or the creek trail: Prothonotary Warbler, Baltimore Oriole, Wood Duck, and Northern Cardinal to name a few. My hypothesis was that you could stack these beauties up against anything the Amazon, the Serengeti, or the highlands of New Guinea had to offer, and our birds would hold their own in aesthetic appeal.

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Scarlet Tanagers

Beauty in birds is in the eye of the beholder. One early spring, I took a group of visiting British ornithologists to Great Falls to show them some American birds. They had traveled all over wild Africa and Asia but had never been birding in the U.S. Toward the end of our walk, we came upon a Northern Cardinal, a Blue Jay, and a Pileated Woodpecker in the span of a few feet. They stood transfixed and ignored subtle hints to keep moving through the biting cold, all for the sake of three of the more common birds in our area.

One famous birder once noted, if you took our Blue Jay and stuck it on top of some mountain in Mexico and that single peak was the entire extent of its range in the wild, amateur ornithologists by the thousands would make a pilgrimage to see one of the most magnificent birds on the planet. But because it is nearly in everyone's backyard and is far from shy, we ignore it, unlike the hard-to-spot Scarlet Tanager along the creek trail, the stunner of the Cabin John spring. —