

For the Birds – Uncommon Finds

In Kinnickinnic Township

by Tom Andersen

I'm always on the lookout for birds not often found in these parts. Knowing where to look and what to look for helps keep the rare ones on my radar. Uncommon birds can be a once a year or even once in a lifetime sighting. Birders often have a "life list" of sightings and I've added one layer of difficulty to this. I don't count a bird on my list unless I get a good picture. For me, it adds to the pleasure and allow me to enjoy the experience long after it has occurred. Know that you don't have to have a fancy camera to do this. Point and shoot digital cameras these days can give you amazing results. A little patience and stealth, however, are still important.

Sometimes I'll hear a different call and I'll find myself trying to hunt down that bird to get a picture. I've always admired people who know bird calls. Given my less than stellar hearing I'll most likely never be that person. That makes it doubly important that I *know what habitat a bird prefers and what it feeds upon*.

One such bird that I've been trying to photograph for a long time is the Cuckoo. Two species of Cuckoo can, on occasion, be spotted in Kinnickinnic Township. The most likely would be the Black-billed Cuckoo. Less likely, but possible, would be the Yellow-billed Cuckoo.



Black-billed Cuckoo sitting on a caterpillar "tent" dining on caterpillars – Photo TA

The Black-billed Cuckoo could nest in the Township while it is more likely the Yellow-billed would range further south. (Sibley) (Cornell)

Fortunately for me I can hear the call of both Cuckoos. They are very distinct and rather loud. Learning the call of a bird is easy. Remembering is a different story. I use a small hand held digital recorder. Using the Cornell Lab of Ornithology's website, you can easily access virtually any bird call. You can then record bird calls for use in the field. I record an unfamiliar call while in the field to make later comparison should I not spot the critter. Add a pair of binoculars and you are a birder!

The Black-billed Cuckoo has a strong preference for caterpillars. They prefer the denser wooded areas. They are, however, elusive. *Look for a bird about the size of a dove. They have a kind of hunched up look about them.* They don't move much, preferring to sit still patiently searching their surroundings for a meal. This, of course, makes them hard to spot. Fortunately, there is a way to "up your odds" of seeing one. *Look for caterpillar "tents".* If you hear a Cuckoo about, they will likely, at some point, visit it for a meal.

While I see the Scarlet Tanager every spring and summer, I do not consider them to be common. I do know that they are a very secretive little bird. Getting close to them is not easy. Maybe it's because they have those "hot red" bodies accented by jet black wings. Or, maybe it's because *they frequent the high up places in the hardwoods.* Either way, they are not a bird often spotted, let alone photographed.

A fly fishing pal of mine says that unless it's a really bright day, he cannot see them. He is color blind. So, he relies on hearing their call. His hearing, far better than mine, is able to pick up *the decisive robin like call* they make. Using the



Scarlet Tanager – Photo TA

The Scarlet Tanager does nest in Kinnickinnic Township. Since I spotted and tracked the first one a few years back, I have observed them nesting every year. Usually about the time I'm sitting under a tree calling Tom Turkeys or searching for Morel mushrooms (late April through mid-May) the Tanagers show up.

Tanagers are berry eaters, however, like most species of birds they are opportunistic. I experienced this first hand one spring when a Tanager arrived quite early. He found the suet to be a fine substitute for the blackberries and raspberries that were more than a month away from showing.



The Scarlet Tanager sharing the suet with five Yellow-rumped Warblers – Photo TA



Photo TA

I'm always concerned about the Tanagers nesting successfully in my woods. Or shall I say, I am always concerned they will raise their own kind! We always have a pair or two of Cowbirds. Cowbirds parasitize other species of birds as they do not build nests of their own. The Cowbirds always seem to show up pretty early seemingly

scouting out who might be a suitable nest builder for their eggs. Every year I see the wrong bird species feeding Cowbird chicks. It is said that Cowbirds are known to replace Tanager eggs with their own. Unfortunately, the Tanager doesn't seem to know the difference. (Cornell) It is April 27th and as I am writing this I see two pairs of Cowbirds sitting high in the tree patiently observing the birds, especially the Eastern Towhees.

Whether you have 10 trees in your yard or thousands in your woods, the birds of Kinnickinnic Township can add much pleasure to your outdoor experience. Kinnickinnic Township is a great venue for birding.

Sources Used

Photos are from Kinnickinnic Township

Cornell Lab of Ornithology
<https://www.allaboutbirds.org>

Sibley Guide to Birds, David Sibley