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Indigo Bunting *Passerina cyanea*

Indigo Buntings, named for the rich, deep blue of the breeding males, are noteworthy for their southward colonization of citrus groves destroyed by frost in Florida. They breed also in the eastern two-thirds of North America and winter south to Panama and northern Columbia.

Habitat. In the breeding season Indigo Buntings are found in brushy fields, orchards, and along the edges of deciduous woodlands. In central Florida their preferred habitat seems to be elderberry thickets adjacent to overgrown fields and orchards (B. Pranty, pers. obs.). This habitat greatly increased in the 1980s, when severe freezes killed thousands of acres of citrus groves. When these groves were abandoned they became overgrown with weedy vegetation and were ideal breeding sites for buntings and grosbeaks (Taylor et al. 1989; B. Pranty, pers. obs.). By the mid-1990s however, most of these abandoned groves had succeeded to oak or planted pine forest, and supported many fewer buntings than 10 years earlier.



In the summer Indigo Buntings feed largely on insects and spiders, but seeds and berries are also taken (Howell 1932, Payne 1991).

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The female bunting builds the nest with no assistance from her mate. She typically chooses a low site for the nest, usually about 1 m (3 ft) above the ground in a bush or shrub. The nest is a small cup built of coarse grasses, leaves, stems, and strips of bark and is lined with fine grasses. The 2 to 6 white or bluish-white eggs are incubated for 12 or 13 days, and the young fledge at 9 or 10 days (Ehrlich et al. 1988). According to Payne (1991), females nest repeatedly in a season laying as many as 4 clutches but not always with the same male each time.

Seasonal Occurrence. Nesting in Florida lasts from late April until July (Stevenson and Anderson 1994). This species is seen in large numbers in Florida during fall (September to October) and spring (April to May) migrations. In the winter Indigo Buntings are casual in north Florida and rare in central and south Florida.

Status. A scarce breeding bird in Florida at the beginning of this century, the Indigo Bunting has substantially increased its breeding range in recent decades. Originally restricted to the Panhandle, it was first found breeding in the peninsula in 1925 (Howell 1932). Taylor et al. (1989) summarized the Indigo Bunting's summer occurrence in Seminole County. First recorded there in 1981, Indigo Buntings are now found throughout the county, as the Atlas map clearly shows. Atlas fieldwork extended the regular breeding range in Florida south to Pasco County, where the species is locally common (B. Pranty et al. in Paul 1989). The southernmost confirmed breeding record was an isolated nesting in 1968 in central Polk County (Edscorn 1969), an area devoid of recent records.

The "possible" breeding records in the southern half of the peninsula, mostly of males singing in suitable breeding habitat in late May or June, most likely represent pioneering birds attempting to extend the breeding range even farther south. However, some Indigo Buntings are still moving north within this period, as proven by

the tardy migrant in the Keys on 23 May 1987 (Froelich in Langridge 1987). A singing male that remained in Homestead until 26 May 1986 (B. and W. B. Robertson in Langridge 1986) was likewise considered a lingering migrant, but may have been a pioneering bird. Because of the male's frequent singing and habit of choosing conspicuous perches, it is unlikely that this species was overlooked. Furthermore, the male is extremely territorial and quickly responds to recordings of bunting song allowing "probable" breeding evidence to be easily obtained. However, it is difficult to confirm breeding, unless the adults are observed carrying food or fledged young are seen. Fewer than 16% of the quadrangle records represent confirmed breeding.

Bill Pranty

Sponsored by Dorothy S. Morton

Indigo Bunting

