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## Painted Bunting *Passerina ciris*

The Painted Bunting is a small, brilliant songbird of the southern United States and northern Mexico. It is sometimes called the Nonpareil because the male's plumage is often considered to be unequalled. Segments of this species' population winter in Central America, south Florida, and the Antilles.

**Habitat.** Painted Buntings breed in weedy fields, abandoned citrus groves, hedgerows, and other edge habitats. Their nest is usually located in a bush or shrub, from 1 to 2 m (3 to 6 ft) above the ground (Stevenson and Anderson 1994). It is constructed of grasses and leaves and is attached to twigs at the end of a branch, often within a clump of Spanish moss. Most clutches in Florida consist of 4 white eggs with reddish-brown speckles (Sprunt 1954, Stevenson and Anderson 1994). Incubation, solely by the female, lasts 11 or 12 days, and the young fledge at 12 to 14 days of age (Ehrlich et al. 1988).

Their diet consists largely of the seeds of grasses, weeds, and sedges. Animal matter includes beetles, grasshoppers, crickets, and other insects (Howell 1932). During the winter they are frequent visitors to bird feeders, especially in southern Florida.



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**Seasonal Occurrence.** In Florida 2 or 3 broods are raised per season, which extends from May through mid-June (Howell 1932). Migration occurs chiefly during April and May and during September and October.

**Status.** Painted Buntings are common breeders only in the northeastern corner of Florida. However, they have been extending their breeding range inland and southward and now occur south to at least Merritt Island (B. Pranty, pers. obs.).

Gulf coast breeding records mapped by Howell (1932) and Sprunt (1954) were of birds observed during the breeding season only. Painted Buntings have never been documented to breed on the peninsular Gulf coast. According to Stevenson and Anderson (1994), Painted Buntings have been observed in June and July in Key West or on the Dry Tortugas; therefore, some of the "possible" and "probable" breeding records in the Panhandle may also refer to migrants or vagrants. However, a confirmed breeding record exists for Apalachicola, Franklin County in 1966 (Ogden and Chapman 1967), thus, Panhandle records are more likely of pioneering birds moving east to southeast from Alabama.

Thompson (1991) has recently suggested that the two widely separated breeding populations of the Painted Bunting are actually two separate species. This is of extreme interest in Florida, because the Panhandle breeding records may refer to birds of the western population (species), rather than those from the east.

Like the Indigo Bunting and Blue Grosbeak, the Painted Bunting is establishing breeding populations in abandoned citrus groves in central Florida, but this expansion is currently limited to Volusia, Seminole, and Brevard counties. Why it is absent from the peninsular Gulf coast is a mystery, but expansion into this area may occur in the future.

Bill Pranty

Sponsored by M. Vernon and Dorothy Jenkins

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