

Indigo Bunting *Passerina cyanea*

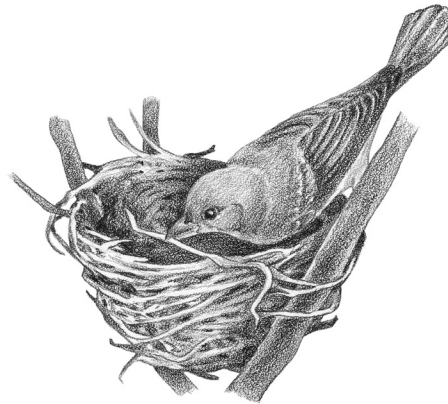


Folk Name: Blue Bird, Blue Finch, Indigo Bird, Little Indigo

Status: Breeder

Abundance: Very Common

Habitat: Overgrown fields with scattered trees, forest edge, and clearings



The Indigo Bunting is one of the most common and widespread breeding birds of overgrown fields and forest clearings throughout the Carolinas. At 5 ½ inches, it is smaller than the similar-looking Blue Grosbeak and it has a smaller bill, and it lacks the brown wing bars of the Blue Grosbeak. During breeding season, the male is simply a deep-blue indigo color all over. In basic plumage, the male is mostly brown with bluish highlights. Females and young males are dull brown with streaking below. The male Indigo Bunting is known for its constant singing on its breeding grounds, and this bird will often sing well into late summer before heading south to the northern Neotropics to spend the winter.

In the nineteenth century, this beautiful and melodious songbird was a favorite of the caged songbird trade. In the 1890s, it was estimated that more than 2,000 were captured and sent to Germany each year. In 1894, one North Carolina news reporter wrote:

The indigo bird. A little songster who is highly prized in Europe. The indigo bird is about the size of a German canary, and of a deep blue all over, with a metallic luster in certain lights that adds much to its beauty. A graceful little fellow inhabiting a lightly-wooded country, where he pours forth his melody from the top of some high tree to his nesting mate below.

His song, says Harper's Young People, though not very powerful, is extremely sweet, and combined with his rich plumage makes him a desirable cage-bird. Large numbers are shipped to Europe every year, showing that he is appreciated there. He is not hard to tame, and should be fed, as a regular thing, on canary-seed—now and then a little green food; while in his estimation no kind of insects come amiss.

If he is given the freedom of the room for flight he is very happy, and will catch flies in a rapid way. Very graceful when flying, the indigo bird will dart from one side of the room to the other stopping instantly, and hovering on the wing for a moment, like the hummingbird.

Fortunately, laws were passed to protect the Indigo Bunting and other songbirds from sale in America in the early 1900s, but their capture and sale continues in Cuba and other countries to this day.

Indigo Buntings generally arrive here in early April and head south for the winter by mid- to late October. In recent years, there have been several sightings of new arrivals during the last week of March. Our peak count is 205 birds tallied by Michael McCloy in Anson County at the Pee Dee National Wildlife Refuge on September 6, 2010. McCloy noted this count was “a conservative estimate. This was just along Wildlife Drive to Gr. Rd!!! Large flocks everywhere, especially in fields before Sullivans Pond. Mostly HY birds.”

There are several twentieth century migration reports of note. Norman Chamberlain reported the early arrival of a male Indigo Bunting in Matthews on March 30, 1952. John Trott watched a male singing in New London, Stanly County, on the late date of October 6, 1955. Sarah Nooe reported two female Indigo Buntings died after striking the ceilometer tower at the Charlotte airport on the night of September 25, 1955. Joe and Becky Norwood collected 11 Indigo Buntings in early October 1959 after they collided with the WSOC television tower during migration. Each of these specimens were female or immature birds. No adult males were found.

Occasionally, an Indigo Bunting may be found lingering in the Central Carolinas during the winter months. We have a half dozen reports from November through February. Lex Glover found one at Landsford Canal State Park on December 15, 1995. Gail B. Ice observed a singing male in York County on February 28, 1996. Jane Lewis had one in southwestern Randolph County from 23 December through 29 December in 2002.

Jonathan Cooley reported one lingering in Mooresville on November 24, 2004. John Buckman reported one in Charlotte on February 2, 2006. Larry Barden reported one at Evergreen Nature Preserve in Charlotte on December 9, 2007. Valerie Abbott photographed one in Randolph County on January 11, 2016.

Nesting in this region generally begins in May and continues through June. This species often has two broods. On June 22, 1930, William McIlwaine described an Indigo Bunting nest he discovered near Sugaw Creek in Charlotte: “Yes, there it was, the nest I had seen some days before, a compact, well depthed, well-built nest about two feet up in a little elder bush. The materials were grasses, mostly small, lined inside with very fine grasses

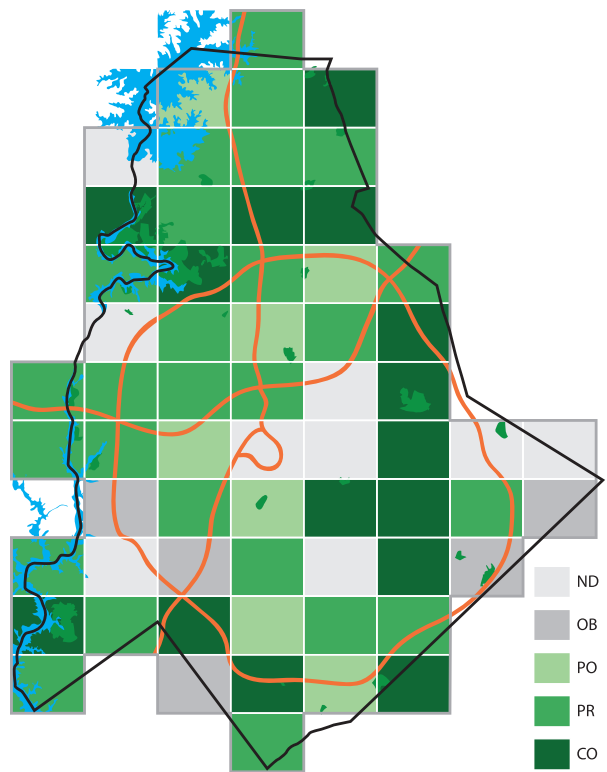


Indigo Bunting (Jim Guyton). Indigo Bunting nest with Brown-headed Cowbird egg. (MCPRD staff)

and some horsehair. Also there was plant fibre, or down. This day the nest contained three almost white, shiny eggs. And very soon there was a pair of anxious owners.”

In 2001, MCPRD implemented a nest success study to learn more about the perils faced by birds nesting in local fields. A total of 13 Indigo Bunting nests were monitored. Almost one-half (46%) of the nests were depredated, 15.5% of the nests were parasitized by Brown-headed Cowbirds, 15.5% of the nests failed, and only 23% of the nests successfully fledged any young.

Despite these challenges, data from the Mecklenburg County Breeding Bird Atlas study indicate the Indigo Bunting remains one of the county’s top 20 most common breeding birds, even with the widespread loss of open field habitat. It is apparent this bird can also nest successfully in utility right-of-ways, small clearings and light gaps within forests, and along weedy road edges.



Mecklenburg County Breeding Bird Atlas:
Nearly Ubiquitous (PR/26 CO/15)