

Painted Bunting *Passerina ciris*



Folk Name: Nonpareil (no-other-bird-is-my-equal),
Butterfly Finch

Status: Migrant

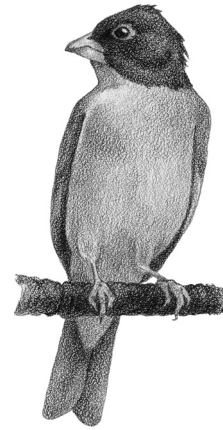
Abundance: Very Rare

Habitat: Bird feeders, dense shrubby areas, forest edge

Many people have declared the male Painted Bunting to be the single most beautiful songbird found in the Carolinas. There is no doubt that it is certainly one of our most attractive. This bird is an odd, but quite pleasing mix of bluish purple, red vermilion, and golden green. In 1902, North Carolina naturalist H.H. Brimley wrote: "Of birds of brilliant plumage we are favored in the southeastern part of the State with having the nonpareil or painted bunting as a summer resident. This little fellow is as gaudy as some of the tropical parrots and trogons."

Throughout the nineteenth century, the Painted Bunting, then called the Nonpareil, was a popular caged songbird sold in the United States and Europe. In the 1850s, tens of thousands of birds, especially German canaries, were sold annually in New York City alone, and like the Indigo Bunting, Painted Buntings were part of this caged bird trade. In 1892, over 3,000 Nonpareils were exported to a single commercial buyer in Germany for breeding and resale. At that time, one Charlotte merchant, G.S. Reed and Co., kept a small stock of these birds for sale to local residents along with cardinals, canaries, and other colorful and melodious birds. By 1905, laws were enacted to help stop this trade in live birds. Unfortunately, this practice still continues in Mexico and Cuba today, where thousands of Painted Buntings are captured and sold each year, with one biologist documenting 700 collected by one group of poachers over a single weekend in 2004.

The breeding range of the Painted Bunting extends from the southeastern tip of North Carolina south along



the Atlantic Coast to Florida and then westward into Louisiana, Texas, and Mexico. The western breeding population extends north into Kansas, Oklahoma, and Arkansas. Most Painted Buntings winter in southern Florida, Cuba, southern Mexico, and Central America.

According to U.S. BBS data, the breeding population in the Southeast declined more than 50% during the period from 1961 to 1991. In North Carolina, the breeding population is small and has been restricted to a narrow area from Carteret County to Brunswick County. In South Carolina, this bird primarily nests in the Coastal Plain. Traditional nesting is believed to have occurred primarily on coastal barrier islands and in mainland maritime forest; however, much of this habitat was destroyed. In South Carolina these birds are now also found breeding "extensively in fallow fields woodland edges, and hedgerow habitat of the inner coastal plain." Some birds nest as far west as Aiken County, and at least twice, evidence of breeding has been documented as far north as Chesterfield County. Post-breeding birds usually migrate



Painted Bunting on February 6, 2015. (Leigh Anne Carter)



Male Painted Bunting on January 23, 2016. (Jeff Lemons)

southward by October, but individuals occasionally linger in the Carolinas during the winter, and a few occasionally stray into the Piedmont.

We have a total of four records of Painted Buntings from around the Central Carolina region during the twentieth century. Grace Morris found a pair of Painted Buntings at her feeder in the brickyard area of Stanly County on April 24, 1971, while she was helping out with the Stanly Spring Bird Count. The state count compiler later noted “that an unusually large number may have visited the central Carolinas this spring.” Mike Boatwright observed an adult male singing in the small town of Jefferson, Chesterfield County, due south of Pageland, SC, on July 31, 1976. At the time, this location was over 50 miles away from any known breeding site. Birders in Moore, Spartanburg County, reported finding a Painted Bunting in 1993 and again in 1994. The latter bird was described as a “brilliant male.”

We already have just over a dozen records of Painted Buntings from the region during the twenty-first century. On September 12, 2005, Taylor Piephoff found a green Painted Bunting at Cowan’s Ford Wildlife Refuge in northern Mecklenburg County. An immature male was found at a feeder near Ridgeway in Fairfield County on May 3–4, 2007, and then a female was sighted there on 5–6 May. Will Stuart photographed a male at Pool A in the Carolina Sandhills Wildlife Refuge in Chesterfield County on May 3, 2013.

Amanda Alexander photographed an adult male at a feeder in Mooresville in Iredell County on February 13, 2014. Sarah and Bob McCrory found a “lime-green” adult female or immature bird off Seagrove Road in Randolph County on February 16, 2014. This bird was photographed and remained there for several days. A male showed up in Spartanburg County at a private yard near Duncan Park during the winter of 2015–2016 and returned there the following two winters.

Leigh Anne Carter provided the first photographic documentation of a Painted Bunting in Mecklenburg County. She saw an unusual green-colored bird at her feeders on February 6, 2015, and was able to take several shots of it before it flew away. After reviewing her photographs she identified it as either a female or an immature male. In 2016 and 2017, an adult male showed at another backyard feeder at Mary Buckle’s house off Monarch Drive in Charlotte. This yard is only about 1 ½ miles from the Carter residence. This colorful bird was seen and photographed by many observers. It is possible that this was the same bird that had matured over the summer and had returned to the same general wintering grounds.

On March 9, 2017, a female Painted Bunting was reported at a feeder in Endy in Stanly County. It was seen again the following day, but not after. Steve McInnis reported a Painted Bunting at the Carolina Sandhills Wildlife Refuge on June 24, 2017. On August 7, 2017, Tash Trujillo reported one at Westminster Park in York County.