

Indigo Bunting

Male



Passerina cyanea

The Magical Month of May has finally arrived. However, our spring birds have been slow to arrive this year. Storm fronts south of us kept our song birds grounded, and our recent cold weather didn't help. So, if you haven't already, get your feeders out!

Most of our Neotropical birds start arriving in the first half of May. Indigo Buntings are a bit slower getting here. We usually don't see very many of them until the second or third week of May.

But, they are well worth the wait! Male Indigo Buntings are so blue they almost look iridescent. They aren't all blue, they have black markings on their wings and tail, but the overall impression is a "Jewel" blue. Their heads are even darker blue, sometimes almost looking purple.

Males don't turn completely blue until they are two years old, so if you see

one with scruffy looking brown feathers mixed in with the blue; it's a first year bird.

The males arrive first, and they're the ones we see at our feeders. Every year we see more of them. Until just the last few years, Indigo Buntings weren't very feeder savvy. But like many birds, they're learning to use feeders.

Unfortunately, they often don't hang around the feeders for very long. Once the females arrive, the flocks break up. Unless you have exceptional habitat for them, you probably won't see them at your feeders for very long.

Female



You may never notice the female Indigo Bunting. She absolutely fits the description of a "little brown bird". She may have just a touch of blue on her wings. I think her most distinctive feature is her bright, dark eyes in her otherwise very plain face.

Despite the fact that they don't often frequent our feeders in the summer, Indigo Buntings are one of the most

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abundant nesting species in North Iowa. Think brushy, weedy, overgrown edge habitat.

The males like to sit on high perches, including power lines, and will sing all summer. He's not much help with nesting duties. The females build the nest about three feet off the ground in heavy cover. Construction includes leaves and grasses with a lining of soft grass and deer hair. She binds it all together with spider webs.

The male may help by feeding the fledglings, while she starts a second brood.

Indigo Buntings are very adaptable birds. While they won't be found far from brushy habitat, they are one of the only birds that will nest in the edges of corn fields along overgrown fence lines.



We can attract Indigo Buntings with platform feeders stocked with white proso millet. They also love nyjer seed, and are rapidly learning to compete with the Goldfinches at their feeders. There are few sights more striking than this mix of rich blue and bright yellow at a feeder.

Indigo Buntings arrive late and leave early. By mid-August they start leaving us for their wintering grounds in Central America.

However brief their visits to our feeders may be these little, incredibly blue, birds are worth the effort to attract them.

MAY BIRD NOTES

Bird strikes on our windows happen much more often during migration. Our year-round yard birds have learned to avoid the glass. Migrants hit the windows because the glass reflects the sky and trees, and the birds don't know it's solid. Mounting feeders directly on the windows helps avoid bird strikes, and are a lot of fun. Hummingbird feeders are great and small window feeders for seed and jelly also work well.

If window mounted feeders aren't an option, Window Alerts will work even on large expanses of glass. They are static clings that go on the outside of the window and have ultraviolet content that birds (but not people) can see.

As the season heats up (and dries up) water becomes very important to our birds. Consider adding a bird bath with a dripper or Water Wiggler to your yard if you don't have one. Moving water is magical!

Don't forget that feeding safflower will discourage the Grackles and Starlings from mobbing our feeders.

Enjoy your birds!

Ellen S. Montgomery

