

Indigo Bunting

Male



If you see an Indigo Bunting from a distance or in poor light, it will just look like a small dark bird. But get a closer look in brighter light, and you'll be awed by a breathtaking blue bird.

That is, of course, if you're looking at a male Indigo Bunting. Males are a deep vibrant blue. Their color is darkest on their heads, appearing almost purplish-blue. Their wings and tail are actually black, but are edged in blue, so they look all dazzling blue.

Female Indigo Buntings are the very definition of "a little brown bird." They are a soft cocoa-brown, darker on top, lighter brown underneath. They do have faint streaking underneath and very indistinct wing bars. Occasionally they may show a touch of blue on their wings, tails or rump.

Female



With no real distinguishing marks, they are easy to overlook. I personally think they are pretty little bird. Their dark eyes on otherwise plain faces adds personality that appeals to me. To complicate matters, you will undoubtedly see Indigo Buntings that are splotchy blue and brown with no discernable pattern to the colors. Not to worry, these are first year males.

No matter what their variable color schemes are, all Indigo Buntings are stocky little birds, averaging about five inches in length. (Slightly smaller than a House Finch.) Although they may look like sparrows, they are actually in the same family with Cardinals and Grosbeaks. Their short, thick conical bills reveal how they are related.

Indigo Buntings winter in the West Indies, Southern Mexico and south into Central America and Northern South America. A few may linger in Southern Florida. The males are brown like the females in the winter, but molt into their velvet blue before they cross the Gulf of Mexico to return to us.

Like most songbirds Indigo Buntings migrate at night. We still don't know a lot about how birds navigate their long journeys, but Indigo Buntings are one of the few birds that have been extensively studied. These studies have shown that, at least for the Buntings, the stars are a major guiding factor.

Indigo Buntings breed almost entirely in the Eastern United States. They're a bit later arriving here than some of our Neotropical migrants. A few may trickle in around May 1st, but most don't whoosh in until the middle or even late May.

The gorgeous blue males arrive first, sometimes in sizable flocks. This is when we see them at our feeders. Unfortunately, they don't linger for very long. (Unless you have a wonderful habitat for them.) When the barely



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noticeable females filter in, the flocks break up.

Indigo Buntings are very social in migration and on their wintering grounds, but during the breeding season they become very unfriendly toward one another. Even mated pairs don't hang out together very much.

Perfect habitat for Indigo Buntings is hedgerows, brushy edges and roadsides, overgrown weedy patches and thicket. They are also one of the very few birds that have adapted to farming and may even nest in the edges of cornfields if the fields are near suitable food sources.

After selecting a mate, the camouflaged little female starts building her nest. Her first choice in a mate will be the brightest blue she can find, so first year males don't have much of a chance to breed.

She builds the nest just three to four feet above the ground in thick brush. She lays her eggs, broods them and then feeds the hatchlings all by herself.

So, what's the pretty blue male doing while she works so hard? He's sitting on some prominent perch singing his heart out! Most birds get pretty quiet in the midday heat, but not these guys. They sing all day long and keep singing until it's time to fly south again. He may feed his fledglings while his mate starts another nest, but all in all he's not much help.

The best way to attract Indigo Buntings to your yard, is to provide White Proso Millet in a flat feeder. They also love nyjer seed and are becoming much more adapted to using our finch feeders. Seeing bright yellow Goldfinches and Indigo Buntings on the same feeder is a remarkable sight.

I mentioned at the beginning, that you need good light to see the blue color of the indigo Buntings. The reason this is true, is because there is no blue in any bird feathers. They look blue because of structures in the

feathers that reflect the light. If you crush a "blue" feather, it will no longer appear blue.

As we finally get spring in May all of our exciting and colorful migrants will be arriving. Just because our spring is late doesn't mean the birds will be. They don't watch the Weather Channel before leaving on their journeys to us. Storm fronts immediately south of us can slow their arrival, but our dreadful April weather really won't delay their return.

Have your feeders ready for them as May arrives and be sure to keep suet out.

MAY BIRD NOTES

It is time to get your hummingbird and Oriole feeders out if you have not done so yet. You want to have them up when they arrive. If they pass you by, it's much harder to attract them.

A note about hummingbird food. There has been a lot of talk about red hummingbird feed being bad for the hummingbirds. If you make your own nectar, don't add red food coloring to it. If you have a red feeder, you can use clear nectar. If you need red nectar avoid any that has Red 40 dye or any other artificial colorant in it. Most of the manufacturers are using hibiscus flower concentrate now but be sure to look at the ingredients.

Let's take a moment to talk about ducks too. If you are going to feed the ducks or geese, please don't feed them bread. White bread, especially, has no nutritional value and can actually be harmful to them. Instead consider feeding them shelled or cracked corn. It is cheaper than a loaf of bread and so much better for them.

Enjoy Your Birds!

Ellen S. Montgomery

