



Indigo Bunting

Birds of Barrington:

INDIGO BUNTING

A MONTH INTO SUMMER, birdsong has diminished considerably. But a few species still vocalize regularly. One of the most conspicuous songsters is the indigo bunting (*Passerina cyanea*), a diminutive summer resident of the Barrington area that excites observers with its electric blue.

The song of the indigo bunting has a ringing quality that readily distinguishes it from other birds still singing at this time of year. The notes of Midwestern buntings (often quite different from those of their Eastern counterparts) are strong, evenly spaced and, if you listen closely, given in pairs and hopping up and down the musical scale.

Once you hear the song, it's usually easy to

locate the bird. It favors open perches, often at the top of a dead tree. It can appear dark, even blackish, from a distance but once you get binoculars on the bird, you gasp at the ultramarine blue, especially when illuminated by sunlight.

The female is an entirely different matter. She is unremarkable, a dull brown that is as drab as her mate's color is vibrant. While he sings ostentatiously, she tends the nest she has made in dense vegetation usually only a foot or two above the ground. It is built of coarse grasses and bark strips, lined with deer hair or fine grass, and contains usually three or four white eggs. She is the sole incubator, leaving her mate free to serenade.

Indigo buntings regularly visit bird feeders,

especially in early spring when they first arrive, and sometimes in colorful association with goldfinches and rose-breasted grosbeaks. During and after nest season, I often see the male and female together. They hardly look like a pair—the plumage is so completely different—until you notice that the size and shape are alike. Both birds have the short, conical bills of seedeaters and both have small, beady black eyes. As the season progresses, you can recognize young males by the splotchy brown and blue plumage as their adult blue feathers begin to grow in.

The species is surprisingly common in the Barrington area. You won't see buntings in town, but can expect to see and hear them in local natural areas, such as Citizens for Conservation's Flint Creek Savanna and Grigsby Prairie, and Lake and Cook County Forest Preserves. They favor shrubby edges between open and wooded areas. At this time of year, I hear and spot them regularly as I bike local country roads.

The buntings will linger until September or even October, then will depart for their wintering grounds in Central America and the West Indies. Their ringing treetop songs will fade until next spring when we can welcome back both their music and blue brilliance to our countryside. U

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