

# Indigo Bunting

# Indigo Bunting

## Appearance

Indigo Buntings are small (roughly sparrow-sized), stocky birds with short tails and short, thick, conical bills. The male and female Indigo Bunting look very different; they are sexually dimorphic.



Male (above) and female (below)

# Indigo Bunting

## Appearance

During breeding season, the male is blue all over, deepest on its head. It is black in the lores (area in front of the eyes). Its wing feathers are dark, edged in blue. Its upper bill is blackish and the lower mandible is blue-gray. The female is brownish overall with buff-colored wing bars. The throat is white. The breast has faint streaking and is whitish on lower belly and under tail.



Male



Female

# Indigo Bunting

## Appearance

Non-breeding males are covered with irregular patches of brown and blue.



Male in non-breeding plumage

# Indigo Bunting

## Appearance

Immature Indigo Buntings look very similar to the female Indigo Bunting.



Immature Indigo Bunting

# Indigo Bunting

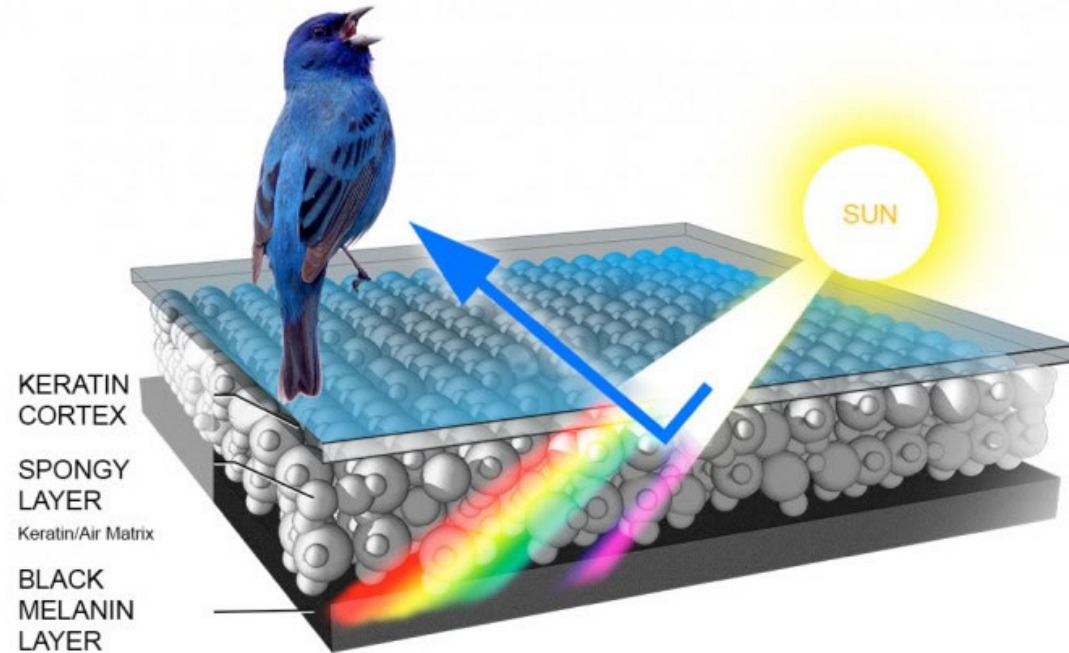
## Appearance

*Like all other blue birds, Indigo Buntings lack blue pigment.* Their indigo color comes instead from microscopic structures in the feathers that reflect blue light, much like the airborne particles that cause the sky to look blue. Bunting plumage does contain the pigment melanin, whose dull brown-black hue you can see if you hold a blue feather up so the light comes from behind it, instead of toward it.



**Blue jay feathers**  
**Left: Normal view**  
**Right: Backlit**

This example is for the Blue Jay,  
but it is also true for the Indigo Bunting.



# Indigo Bunting

## Appearance

Indigo Buntings can be confused with Blue Grosbeaks.

For a more complete comparison of the two species check out this DBC mini-tutorial on this topic:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ol-FdbbO8W0>



Male Indigo Bunting



Male Blue Grosbeak

# Indigo Bunting Sounds

From The Cornell Lab of Ornithology <https://www.birds.cornell.edu/home/>

## SONGS

Male Indigo Buntings whistle a bright, lively song of sharp, clear, high-pitched notes that lasts about two seconds. They are voluble, singing as many as 200 songs per hour at dawn and keeping up a pace of about one per minute for the rest of the day. Notes or phrases are often repeated in pairs: *what! what! where? where? see it! see it!* This pattern is recognizable, although the precise tune varies from place to place. Young Indigo Buntings learn their songs from males near where they settle to breed, and this leads to “song neighborhoods” in which all nearby males sing songs that are similar to each other and that are different from those sung more than a few hundred yards away.

## CALLS

Indigo Buntings give short, sharp, thin, one-syllable *spit* or *chip* calls.

Listen to the songs and calls at:

[https://www.allaboutbirds.org/guide/Indigo\\_Bunting/sounds](https://www.allaboutbirds.org/guide/Indigo_Bunting/sounds)



# Indigo Bunting

## Sounds

The male Indigo Bunting doesn't restrict himself to singing just in the morning. The male sings even in the heat of the afternoon, when most birds are quiet.



Male Indigo Buntings are often seen singing perched at the very top of a tree.

# Indigo Bunting

## Diet

Indigo Buntings forage at all levels, from the ground up into shrubs and trees. They eat insects from leaves, seeds from ground or stems, and berries from shrubs. They feast on spiders and small insects during the summer, getting the extra protein they need for successful nesting, then eat seeds, buds, and berries during migration and in winter.



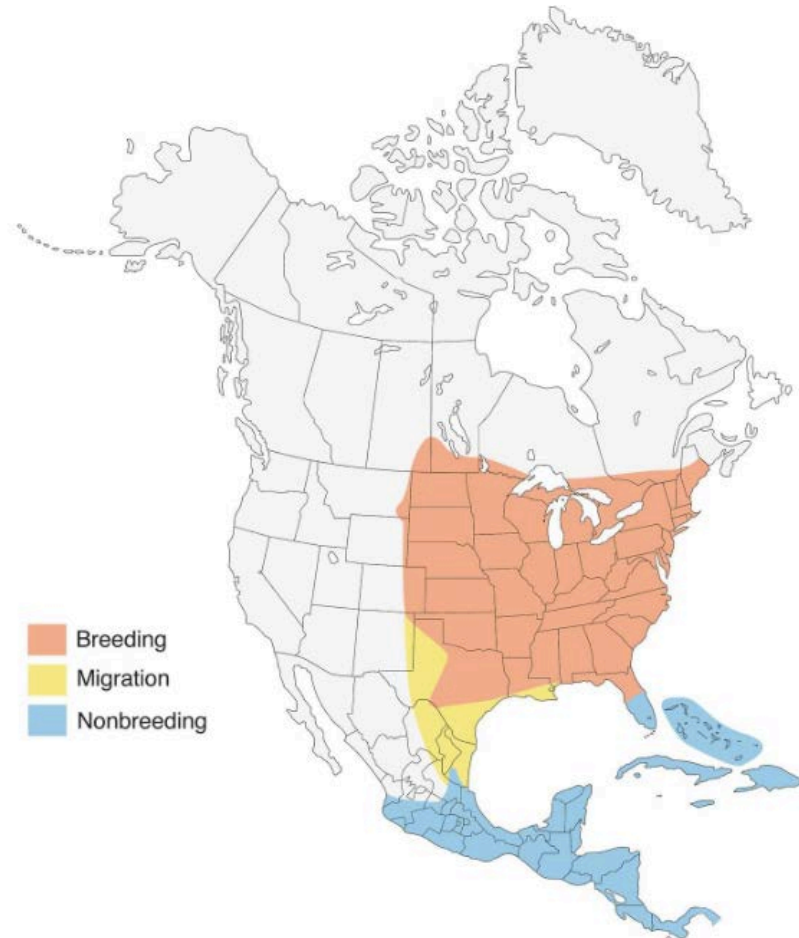
Indigo Bunting feeding on Barnyard Grass.

# Indigo Bunting

## Range

The Indigo Bunting is a long-distance migrant. They fly about 1,200 miles each way between breeding grounds in eastern North America and wintering areas from southern Florida to northern South America.

Indigo Buntings can be seen in DuPage County from early May through mid-October.



# Indigo Bunting Migration

Indigo Buntings played a central role in a series of orientation and navigation experiments conducted on migratory birds during the 1960s. Scientists placed caged buntings inside a planetarium, manipulated star patterns, and noted the directions the birds attempted to fly in response. The results indicated that Indigo Buntings (and other nocturnal migrants) use the movement of the stars to navigate during migration.



By systematically covering up parts of the night sky within a planetarium, Cornell scientist Stephen Emlen went on to show that the birds gauge direction using the pattern of stars nearest the North Star, the pivot around which all the stars rotate and a reliable reference for due north. He also was able to conclude that young buntings learn this pattern during their first summer.

# Indigo Bunting

## Habitat

Indigo Buntings are common on the edges of woods and fields; along roads, streams, rivers, and powerline cuts; and in logged forest plots, brushy canyons, and abandoned fields where shrubby growth is returning. They avoid mature forests.



Indigo Bunting at the edge of a field.



Indigo Bunting in a field, perched on a ragweed plant.

# Indigo Bunting

## Habitat

Indigo Buntings are common on the edges of woods and fields; along roads, streams, rivers, and powerline cuts; and in logged forest plots, brushy canyons, and abandoned fields where shrubby growth is returning. They avoid mature forests.



Indigo Bunting along a road.



Indigo Bunting at a forest edge.

# Indigo Bunting

## Behavior

The female builds the nest and incubates the eggs. She chooses a concealed nest site in low vegetation, within a meter of the ground. The nest is built in a crotch or fork where branches meet, providing a supporting network of vertical and diagonal twigs. The nest is an open cup of grass, leaves, weeds, and bark strips, lined with finer materials.



Female Indigo Bunting gathering nesting material.



The eggs are white or pale bluish white.  
There are commonly 3-4 eggs.

# Indigo Bunting

## Behavior

The nestlings are usually fed only by the female, while the male defends the nest from intruders. At some nests, the male helps feed young when they are nearly old enough to fly. The young usually leave the nest 9-12 days after hatching. The male sometimes takes over the feeding of fledged young, while the female begins a second nesting attempt. Indigo Buntings usually have two broods per year.



Indigo Bunting nestlings



Newly-fledged Indigo Bunting



# Indigo Bunting

## Behavior

The nestlings are usually fed only by the female, while the male defends the nest from intruders. At some nests, the male helps feed young when they are nearly old enough to fly. The young usually leave the nest 9-12 days after hatching. The male sometimes takes over the feeding of fledged young, while female begins a second nesting attempt. Indigo Buntings usually have two broods per year.



Female Indigo Bunting feeding a grasshopper to a fledgling.

# Indigo Bunting

As featured in one the first bird field guides

Florence Augusta Merriam Bailey (August 8, 1863 – September 22, 1948) was an American ornithologist and nature writer. She organized early Audubon chapters and was an activist for bird protection. She wrote what is considered the first bird field guide in the modern tradition, *Birds Through an Opera-Glass*, published in 1890.

In this excerpt from Bailey's 1898 book, *Birds of Village and Field: A Bird Book for Beginners*, she describes the Indigo Bunting:

In early June one of the predominating eastern songs is that of the Indigo-bird,

*Chrit-ty – chrit-ty – chrit-ty chrit, chrit, chrit, chrit*  
*Chrit-ty – chrit-ty chrit, chrit, chrit, ta, tee*  
*Chrit-ty – chrit-ty – chrit, chrit, chrit, chrit, chree*

It seems commonplace enough when other birds are singing, but when the hot weather has silenced the main choir, the Indigo's solo rings out with great good cheer. He often takes a solitary tree, and as if mounting a ladder, flies higher and higher up its branches as he sings.



# Indigo Bunting

## Feeders

You can attract Indigo Buntings to your yard with feeders, particularly with small seeds such as thistle or nyjer. Indigo Buntings also eat many insects, so live mealworms may attract them as well.



An Indigo Bunting and American Goldfinch on a thistle feeder.

# Indigo Bunting Names

## Common name Indigo Bunting

*Indigo* refers to the bird's deep blue plumage.

*Bunting*: The origin of *bunting* is not clear. It may be derived from of cognate with the German *bunt*, meaning "speckled," as are some of the species in this group.



## Scientific name *Passerina cyanea*

*Passerina*: A diminutive of *passer*, the Latin for "sparrow"; the bird is quite small.

*cyanea*: New Latin for "blue," derived from *kyanos*. The bird is almost completely deep blue.

