

Indigo Bunting

Passerina cyanea

Indigo Buntings inhabit woodlands in early to middle successional stages of reforestation. Three factors seem to characterize the species' habitat selection: low, thick, often thorny shrubbery for nest sites; high song perches; and open areas for foraging. Common habitats include overgrown pastureland, edges of fields, hedgerows, clear cuts, burns, ski slopes, power line rights-of-way, and orchards. The species is apparently little affected by elevation, as it nests up to at least 1,067 m (3,500 ft) in the Taconic and Green mountains.

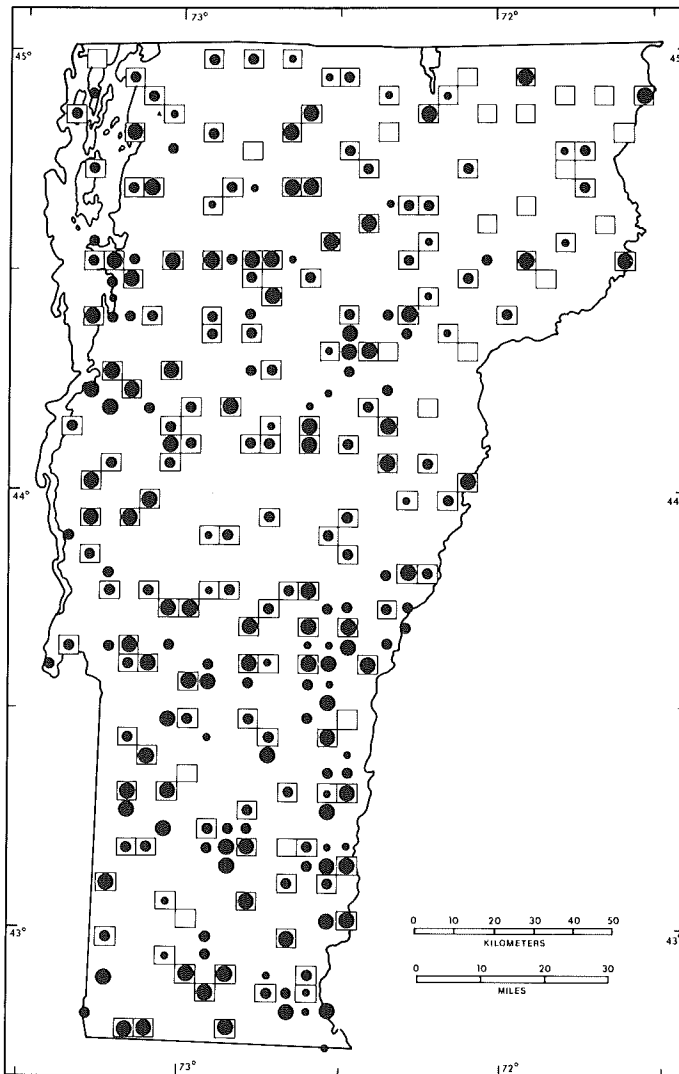
These birds are easily located. The brilliantly plumaged males sing incessantly from conspicuous high perches such as tall trees, shrubs, and roadside wires. Because of the species' song behavior and dependence on edge situations, the presence of breeding pairs can be detected from roadsides, and even from moving vehicles. Observation of distraction displays (DD) constituted 13% of Atlas Project confirmations for the species in Vermont; recently fledged young (FL), 24% of confirmations; and parents with food (FY), 45% of confirmations.

Indigo Buntings arrive in Vermont during the second and third weeks of May; an extreme early date exists for April 26. The cuplike nest is placed low, 0.6–3.7 m (2–12 ft) up in thick shrubbery, and is often well-protected by thorny vegetation such as briars (*Rubus* spp.), junipers, and hawthorns. It is constructed from grasses, rootlets, and other fibrous materials, sometimes even snake skins. Egg dates for 5 clutches range from June 8 to July 2. Clutch size in 4 Vermont nests ranged from 3 eggs (1 nest) to 4 eggs (3 nests). Nestlings were reported from June 25 to July 15 (four records). There are only two fledgling dates—June 25 and July 3. The species is considered double-brooded in New York State (Bull 1974), but data from Vermont and 30 clutches from Massachusetts (Bent 1968) seem to indicate that Indigo Buntings are single-brooded in New England.



Indigo Buntings depart from Vermont rather early; most of the autumn movement occurs in August, with a few individuals remaining to late September and, occasionally, into October. The species eats a variety of insects, seeds, and berries, and may visit feeding stations when weather is inclement.

The Indigo Bunting is common over much of Vermont. Earliest references for the state indicate that it was common during the first part of the twentieth century. Palmer (1949), however, cited a long-term decline in the Maine population from the late nineteenth century to the early 1930s; an increase in abandoned farmland reversed this trend midcentury. This assessment probably applies well to Vermont, with its similar history of clearing and reforestation. The Indigo Bunting becomes progressively scarcer in Vermont to the north and east. It was absent from 21% of Atlas Project priority blocks in the North Central region and 50% of the priority blocks in the Northeast Highlands. Its presence in the Northeast Highlands may be comparatively recent, as was its appearance within the central Adirondacks of New York, which occurred around 1947 (Bull 1974). The blocks in which the species occurs in the Northeast Highlands are in major stream valleys (Paul Stream and the Nulhegan River). The species may eventually expand into other areas of suitable habitat, such as maturing clear



No. of priority blocks in which recorded

TOTAL 158 (88%)

Possible breeding: 21 (13% of total)

Probable breeding: 71 (45% of total)

Confirmed breeding: 66 (42% of total)

Physiographic regions in which recorded

	no. of priority blocks	% of region's priority blocks	% of species' total priority blocks
Champlain Lowlands	30	97	19
Green Mountains	49	91	31
North Central	15	79	9
Northeast Highlands	8	50	5
East Central	17	89	11
Taconic Mountains	16	100	10
Eastern Foothills	23	96	15

cuts, from its riparian strongholds in the region.

The indigo color so evident in the male's plumage is produced by the feathers' refraction of light rather than by pigment. During fall migration and winter these birds assume the same drab coloration as the females, belying their summer beauty.

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