

In Search of the Painted Bunting

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South Texas Border Chapter

For me, this year's City Nature Challenge (CNC) was the best. I began to feel the thrill that I suspect real birders feel when they add a rare species to a Life List, because I was dazzled by some out-of-the-ordinary birds. At least they were out-of-the-ordinary for me---this is also a story about my naïve enthusiasm.

The CNC adventure began at the McAllen Nature Center where my husband and I had close encounters with adult and baby cottontail rabbits, spiny lizards, muddy paw prints, and many, many diverse piles of rain-melted poop. But we saw only a few birds.

Early the next morning something much more exciting happened by a McAllen hike and bike trail, as I saw what turned out to be a lone Yellow-crowned Night Heron striding very slowly beside the creek. Of course I didn't know it was a Yellow-crowned Night Heron, only that I'd



never seen anything that spectacular on my frequent visits to our creek. It had bright orange legs, piercing red eyes, and the bearing of a VIP. By the next day it was gone.

Two days later, I would see another Yellow-crowned Night Heron at the Edinburg Wetlands (or could he be the same fellow?), along with a lone American White Pelican, and a big flock of Wilson's Phalaropes, who appeared to be swarming like insects on the water's surface. Later I learned that they have a special feeding technique---quickly spinning in the water to create a whirlpool that sucks up their dinner---and it is worth seeing. The Cornell Lab of Ornithology has a video:

<https://academy.allaboutbirds.org/wilsons-phalarope-foraging/>

Yellow-crowned Night Heron (*Nyctanassa violacea*)

But it was on April 30, in the midst of these other fine events, that my husband spied a male Painted Bunting sitting in our grapefruit tree. He got a single, quick picture, but forty minutes



later it reappeared, alternately foraging in our flowerbed and swinging from the stem of a pink cosmos, where it stayed for about ten minutes.

Painted Buntings have been nicknamed “nonpareil” (“without equal”) and called the most beautiful bird in North America. They are brilliantly eye-catching. Sadly, their beauty has led to their sale as pets in Central America.

This was the only Painted Bunting we’ve seen at our house in eleven years, in spite of daily observation of our yard. And it was only my second sighting ever. The first, at South Padre Island, was so remarkable that I can still picture the location.

Painted Bunting (*Passerina ciris*)

With a bit of research, I learned that Painted Buntings breed all over Texas but winter in Mexico. In fact, Texas and southeastern Oklahoma are the breeding strongholds of the western population of Painted Buntings. They seem to prefer semi-open country with scattered trees and shrubs, or brushy habitat along the edges of waterways, although they also nest in woodlands. Several experts said they are “hard to see” and “shy at the feeder.”

Consulting eBird’s current Relative Abundance statistics for Texas, I see that from March 29 to November 9, they appear in 78-87% of our state, about double the area occupied by the Great-tailed Grackle. Mean relative abundance during breeding season is 1.36. This is defined as

the count of individuals of a given species detected by an expert eBirder on a 1 hour, 1 kilometer traveling checklist at the optimal time of day. Relative abundance predictions have been optimized for search effort, user skill, and hourly weather conditions, specific for the given region, season, and species, in order to maximize detection rates.

So we may picture a skilled birder encountering a Painted Bunting slightly more than once per hour of birding during the breeding season. (Unfortunately, this mean is calculated across all the varied habitat zones of Texas.)

Now I was puzzled. My childhood (1950's-60's) memories of North Central Texas contain no such bird. In fact, the most exotically colored birds I believe I ever saw were Blue Jays, Orioles, and Cardinals. And I was an outdoor child who loved bright-colored things. How would I not remember a Painted Bunting? Or, alternately, how were so many other people somehow observing them and not telling me? Were the buntings actually all around us then? Or are they relative newcomers to Texas?

So I needed information about the Texas past, not the present. I had already been wondering about the earlier natural environment of East and North Central Texas, particularly in the mid-1800's, when my family first arrived; I had wanted a more vivid sense of what they encountered. So I read naturalist Gideon Lincecum's account of his remarkable Texas adventures in 1835, but Lincecum's focus was on plants and game, and he mentioned few birds. I was beginning to see how hard reconstruction of past landscapes might be.

Well-known historic bird counts did not help with the bunting problem. Audubon's Christmas bird counts began in 1900, but the data are sporadic for Texas, and Painted Buntings would normally not be expected in North Texas in the winter. The North American Breeding Bird survey does not begin until 1968 over the full continent, and the data are hard to access and interpret. North Central Texas Bird Records (Stillwell, 1939), sparse as they are, do record the Painted Bunting as "Common-Fairly Common" in spring and summer.

Seeking more complete answers, I began exploring eBird and learned that eBird does incorporate some historic data from individual naturalists' checklists and samples, and there is a movement afoot to salvage more of this old data. Without it we have little way of interpreting future changes in species' range and abundance. (For an overview of historic data in eBird, see <https://www.audubon.org/news/how-birding-lists-deceased-are-finding-new-life-ebird> .)

Here's part of what I found. In the two main decades of my childhood, 1950-70, a few extraordinary birders were traveling in parts of Texas and other states when and where the buntings breed and keeping records, as follows:

Mary Anne McClendon reported plentiful painted buntings from Travis County and surrounds, 1958-60, and in the LRGV and Corpus Christi in the mid-60s. Gene W. Blacklock reported around 25 painted buntings per year in Corpus Christi and surrounds. Tim Gollob birded in the Fort Worth area in the late 1960's, observing a maximum of 58 painted bunting sightings in 1967. Lee Jones and others reported many sightings in the LRGV in the same period.

And even through the late 1940's, a birder labelled "MTOS-Shelby" observed many painted buntings in their northerly strongholds in the Wichita Mountains of southern Oklahoma and along the Mississippi River near Memphis. Shelby even made it to Edinburg in 1955, reporting buntings there.

Although these observations are scattered and eBird doesn't tell us anything about who these birders were or how they structured their work, I am satisfied to say that, yes, there were Painted

Buntings around during my childhood summers. If I didn't see them, it's probably because my parents weren't prone to take me exploring brushy verges in the country. And we weren't lucky enough to have a backyard bunting visitor. Which is too bad!

But what's more important is the inspiration I've taken from these pioneering naturalists who worked so hard to leave us data that is increasingly important, given climate and habitat change. I went on to find out more about those reachable through Google (sadly, Mary Anne McClendon was not to be found).



Gene Blacklock is a famous bird photographer and author of two field guides to Texas birds. H. Lee Jones is a professional biologist, bird photographer, and now novelist, whose research centered on the birds of Belize. Tim Gollob is a recently retired Dallas priest. According to a *Dallas News* article, "Birding is Father Tim's greatest passion, but this life-long recycler also delights in bringing home whatever he finds in his path: a sparkly shoe, railroad nails, tinsel, a random bell. 'I'm like the crows,' he said. 'I find something shiny and take it to my nest here.'" (Sharon Grigsby, 4/9/2021)

Recording birding data is important for the future

--photo by Diane Hall

My exploration has encouraged me to keep contributing shiny things to iNaturalist, and, even better, to gain enough skill to contribute to more scientifically useful sites such as eBird or eButterfly. And I will keep an eye on my backyard.