

Painted Bunting

Passerina ciris

contributed by Kristine Gabel

October has arrived and with it come our Painted Buntings, perhaps the most colorful birds that we have in the swamp. They are most often seen at the bird feeders near the Bunting House.

The Painted Bunting has two distinct breeding populations in North America.

The eastern population – the ones we see – winters here in South Florida and the West Indies (mostly the Bahamas and Cuba) and migrates north in April to breed along the Atlantic Coast from northeastern Florida to North Carolina.

The western population winters in southern Mexico and Central America and migrates north to Louisiana, Arkansas, Oklahoma, and Texas to breed.

The male bunting is unmistakable. It has a blue head with a red eye ring, a red chest and rump, and a bright green back with darker grayish wing tips and tail.

The female is plain green, slightly darker above, with no visible markings. Juveniles, both male and female, are green like the females but are more of a grayish-green.

Buntings prefer somewhat open areas with low dense brush surrounding some taller trees.

They tend to forage on the ground and in the fall and winter their diet consists mostly of seeds. During the breeding season, they primarily eat insects, insect larva, and spiders, and they have even been observed taking insects out of spider webs.

Because of their preferred habitat and feeding preferences, they are often very hard to find; however, they are



easily attracted to bird feeders during the fall and winter.

Males are very territorial on their northern nesting grounds, defending their territories with songs and sometimes fights that include pecking, wing striking, and grappling. They are pugnacious and the disputes are sometimes bloody and fatal. However, they get along well here because there is no female or territory to defend.

Painted Bunting territorial and mating songs are a fast, repeated warble of different tones, but all we might hear during

the winter is their call note—a sharp, metallic sounding *tsick*.



Painted Bunting Trivia

- The Painted Bunting belongs to the *Passerina* genus of birds in the Cardinal family *Cardinalidae*.
- Many Southwest Florida native birds have some true green feathers, but the female Painted Bunting is the only native bird to have ALL green feathers, although several shades of green.
- In French, the Painted Bunting is known as *Passerin nonpareil*, meaning Without Equal.
- In Spanish, it is known as *Mariposa Pintada*, meaning Painted Butterfly.
- Painted Buntings migrate at night. Our eastern population molts at its nesting area and then travels directly to its wintering grounds here.
- “According to an American Indian legend, when the great spirit was giving all the birds their colors, he ran short of dye so he gave the very last one, the Painted Bunting, a coat of many colors made from dabs of whatever was left.” (Pope 1991).
- According to *Birds of North America*, the maximum verified age of a wild Painted Bunting is 12 years. The mean life expectancy is much less.
- Painted Buntings are on Audubon’s Watch List because breeding data has indicated a significant decline in their numbers, due perhaps to habitat loss, to trapping in Mexico for the pet trade, and/or possibly to some cowbird parasitism.

Frequency of Painted Bunting boardwalk sightings at Corkscrew

Numbers below the months are the percent of days each month from 1998 through September, 2006, that a volunteer observed a Painted Bunting. For more statistics, visit the Corkscrew web page (www.corkscrew.audubon.org), click on “Wildlife” and then on “Birds” in the right column.

