

NOTES AND OBSERVATIONS

The Painted Bunting Invasion of 2019-2020

Painted Bunting (*Passerina ciris*) is a rare but regular vagrant to New York, with a long history of records. Bull (*Birds of the New York Area*. New York: Harper & Row, 1964) listed five records from New York City and Long Island between 1927 and 1952 (not counting earlier records questioned as escapes), and Lindsay (Painted Bunting *Passerina ciris*. pp. 542-543 in E. Levine, ed.: *Bull's Birds of New York State*, Cornell University Press, 1998) cited approximately 30 acceptable records statewide. In the past decade, one or more birds has been recorded annually.

On Saturday, 21 Dec 2019, I was busy patrolling my assigned territory for the Montauk Christmas Bird Count. My morning circuit of owling, seawatching, and bushwhacking had been quite productive overall, largely thanks to the best count day weather I had experienced since I first joined the Point North team in 2015. Some of the early highlights of my efforts included Northern Saw-whet Owls, Rough-legged Hawk, Palm Warblers, and a good smattering of seabirds. With noon fast approaching, I made my way south on East Lake Drive to reunite with the team captains for a lunchtime check-in, scanning for birds along the way. I noticed my count partner, Tim Dunn, had stopped his vehicle up ahead, presumably to sift through the sparrows working the brushline and roadside lawns. Following his lead, I paused on the shoulder some distance behind him for a quick survey. Upon turning my gaze to the left, I spied a bright green songbird foraging in the dry grass directly opposite my car. The vividly plumed passerine was instantly recognizable as a Painted Bunting. I quickly grabbed my camera and fired off a few documentation shots, rushing to get Tim and territory leader Doug Futuyma on the phone and inform them of the discovery. Within minutes, other count participants convened on the site. All happily enjoyed good views of the bunting feeding alongside American Tree Sparrows and Song Sparrows. The bird continued in the vicinity for several days, gradually wandering further up the trail towards the parking area for Big Reed Pond, and was last reported on Tuesday, 24 Dec. Despite its rarity, Painted Bunting had been on my radar as something to watch for during the 2019 CBC season, as a number of sightings had already occurred in the Northeast during the preceding weeks.

The first observation of the season in NYS was made by Marc Passmann at Jamaica Bay National Wildlife Refuge, *Queens*, on 3 Nov. Others soon followed, in numbers far exceeding those seen in a typical year. On 21 Dec, the same day as the Montauk CBC, another bunting was reported by Jim Gobetz at a feeder in Amityville, *Suffolk*. A week later, on 28 Dec, Pete Morris and Taylor Sturm found and photographed a Painted Bunting at Jones Beach State Park, *Nassau*, a first record for the Southern Nassau County CBC. A day later, Heather Wolf turned up yet another at Brooklyn Bridge Park, *Kings*. These last two were long-staying birds, lingering until late January and late February, respectively. Additional

sightings in the new year, 2020, came from Dune Road, *Suffolk* (1 Jan, Thomas Moran), Canarsie Beach Park, *Kings* (16 Feb, Peter Paul), Cemetery of the Resurrection, *Richmond* (16 Feb, Anthony Ciancimino), and Plumb Beach, *Kings* (19 Mar, Shane Blodgett).

The spate of Painted Bunting sightings was felt throughout the Northeast. From eBird, between November and March, multiple records came from the states of New Jersey (4), Pennsylvania (2), Delaware (4), Massachusetts (11), Maryland (10), and Virginia (7); and single birds were reported in Connecticut, New Hampshire, Ohio, and West Virginia. Three distinct individuals were detected in Cape May, New Jersey during December alone. The excitement in New York even continued into the spring, with reports from Heydi Lopes at the Salt Marsh Nature Center, *Kings* on 7 Apr and another feeder visitor discovered by Kaye Fenlon on 14 May in Marcellus, *Onondaga*, the only confirmed NYS sighting outside Region 10 associated with this incursion.

Although several adult males were recorded in other states, all of the birds recorded in NYS were green-feathered female-type or immature birds. Those that were assessed in detail by feather experts like Peter Pyle were determined to be hatching-year individuals, which was not surprising, as this age category seems to be over-represented among fall vagrants to Long Island. It is also important to note that there are two distinct populations of Painted Bunting, the southeastern nominate *P. c. ciris* and the southwestern *P. c. pallidior*. These subspecies are differentiated by molt timing, with *ciris* birds molting at their coastal breeding grounds prior to migrating and *pallidior* individuals typically staging a molt-migration before continuing to their wintering range (Pyle 1997: *Identification Guide to North American Birds*. Point Reyes Station: Slate Creek Press). I, for one, would be curious to know the points of origin for the buntings in the Northeast during this past winter, which could shed some light on the potential environmental factors which led to the influx. However, the variation in these populations is largely clinal, making it difficult to distinguish between them even with exceptional photographs or in-hand measurements (Pyle 1997).

The flurry of Painted Buntings in New York and the other Northeastern states was among the highlights of the 2019-2020 winter season. For a species that is so rare in our area, having cooperative birds at multiple sites was a real treat for observers all across Region 10. In an interesting coincidence, I learned that the bird I found in Montauk was the first easily chaseable Painted Bunting in Suffolk County since one on the same CBC on 19 Dec 1992, found by Andy Baldelli and Dave Mizrahi.

One major advantage of the interconnected, digital age of birding is the ability to track influx events such as this one in real time. Indeed, eBird proved to be a valuable resource for researching and consolidating the full scope of the documented sightings.

I'd like to offer my thanks to Pat Lindsay and Shai Mitra for contacting me with the inspiration for this piece.

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Painted Bunting, feeding on *Panicum*, Jones Beach SP, *Nassau*, here 10 Jan 2020, © Mike Zito. One of seven individuals found in Region 10 this winter. See article pp. 129-130.