



After banding, the adult male calmly awaits his release



The new lime-green band was given to the female

Brunswick Wildlife Painted Bunting Block Party

Sharlene Ackley hosted a block party and thankfully the honored guests showed up. The young lady arrived early and left with four new “bracelets”. The guys were late though we heard them singing nearby for most of the afternoon. The honorees? Painted Buntings!

I recently had the privilege of joining Dr. Jamie Rotenberg, his interns, and several other members of the Painted Bunting Observer Team (PBOT) for a banding session at Sharlene’s home on the salt marsh at the Lockwood Folly Country Club. Sharlene, who has informally logged her “yard bird” observations since 2001, became an early member of PBOT in 2006.

Painted Buntings are migratory songbirds that have two separate breeding populations; one in the coastal plain of North and South Carolina, Georgia and northeastern Florida and a Midwestern population from Kansas and Missouri south to Texas and Louisiana. Southeastern buntings overwinter in South Florida, Cuba, and the Yucatan Peninsula while the Midwestern population spends their winter vacationing in Central America and Mexico.

In North Carolina, Painted Buntings breed along the immediate coast from the South Carolina line north to Morehead City in scrub tree and brush habitat near salt and brackish marshes along the Intracoastal Waterway and various rivers.

“For over thirty years, the bird's population has been declining” according to Dr. Rotenberg. “Now, our data show that the bird may be making a comeback; however, the only way to know for sure is to collect a lot more data and that means more PBOT volunteers!”

Survey data collected since 1966 show a 3.2 percent decline per year for our southeastern population. The decline has been mainly caused by scrub clearing due to increased coastal development and agricultural use that decreased or degraded vital breeding habitat.

As of the end of last season, PBOT had banded 2,355 Painted Buntings in North and South Carolina and recaptured 751. Approximately 300 have already been banded in 2010.

“It is really too early to tell from our dataset; however, we are seeing a significant trend for increased captures per banding site” Jamie continued.

Dr. Rotenberg, an Assistant Professor in the Department of Environmental Studies at UNCW, started the PBOT study as a grassroots effort during the spring of 2005. By summer's end, Jamie had nearly sixty citizen science volunteers.

With funding and assistance from partners such as the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS), the South Carolina Department of Natural Resources, the USGS Patuxent Wildlife Research Center, NC Wildlife Resources, and many others, Dr. Rotenberg expanded PBOT to the program it is today. He now has about 600 volunteers in the Carolinas and Florida plus nine interns participating in his PBOT Summer Undergraduate Internship Program.

The PBOT program's goal is to assist with strategy development for maintaining and increasing the southeastern population. Volunteers play a key role in monitoring and collecting data to support this goal because scientists need to understand more fully the reasons for the bunting decline.

Painted Buntings are not currently endangered or threatened; however, they are at risk of continuing decline. They are included on the Partners in Flight WatchList as a species of special concern. The USFWS list them as a focal species to study and conserve before they reach a threatened or endangered status.

Because Painted Buntings enjoy backyard feeders, PBOT members are able to easily gather data for various demographics. This coupled with the banding effort produces data on distribution, density, abundance, migration, dispersal, reproductive success, adult survival, breeding-site fidelity, and habitat use.

Identifying buntings at feeders is easy. The adult male plumage is so distinctive their French name “*nonpareil*” (which translates to “without an equal”) fits well. As noted author and Director of the Cape May Bird Observatory, Pete Dunne, describes the male “...with colors that make the bird look like it was painted by a crayon-yielding three-year-old.”

Females and immature males are almost entirely green and referred to as “green birds”. Differentiating their gender can only be done if the bird is in hand. Males acquire their definitive adult plumage near the end of their second summer. Since female Painted

Buntings do not sing, if you observe a singing green bunting then it is a second-summer male, trying to attract a mate.

To capture the birds, the team uses a feeder filled with white millet seed that is enclosed in a square wire cage with four openings. After a bird enters, student interns quickly close the entry holes and capture the bird by hand, placing it in a cloth bag for holding and weighing. Beyond the banding itself, processing also includes gender identification; feather molt, condition and wear assessment; accumulated fat estimation; and age determination.

Each bunting receives a unique color combination of bands, allowing observers to quickly identify the bird later. Two new band colors, white and lime green, were added for 2010 to expand the number of available color combinations.

Sharlene's first male banded received the split-colored Red/Yellow band indicating he was banded in North Carolina. He also received a silver Federal band with his own number on it plus indigo and lime green bands to complete the unique combination.

Sharlene's bird watching goes well beyond PBOT. She loves watching fall warblers migrate through her yard, participates in the Great Backyard Bird Count, notes major weather events and their possible impact on her birds, and learns from watching different bird behaviors such as parents rearing their young. She occasionally finds nests, determines their clutch size, and tries to track the number of fledglings produced.

Her yard is a bunting magnet partly because she preserved its wax myrtles, yaupon hollies, and other trees and shrubs instead of clear cutting down to the marsh. About half of her backyard has been kept natural instead of turned into lawn.

Sharlene's observations include a bird banded in 2007 that returned for 2008 and 2009. Checking with Sharlene later in the week, one of the males and the female banded during the block party had returned to her feeder plus a male from last year and an un-banded sub-adult. Such observations are the rewards of PBOT participation!

Want to join or learn more? Click on the 'FAQ' link on the PBOT website at <http://www.paintedbuntings.org/>. To join just sign up online. This will enable you to enter observations on the website.

Also, Dr. Rotenberg will conduct a Painting Bunting workshop on Thursday, July 8 at 3-5 PM at the Baked With Love bakery at 302 North Howe Street in Southport. This free workshop is sponsored by Backyard Wild, located nearby on East Brown Street. Parking will be available at Backyard Wild.

John Ennis



Once weighed and banded, the male sported his unique 4-color combination of bands as he was examined for fat reserves



Post-publish Notes

Date: Mon, 1 Dec 2014 18:23:59 -0500
From: Jack Rogers <jack@4rogers.com>
Subject: Possible Painted Bunting split?

Just found out earlier today that there was a proposed split of the 2 US Painted Bunting populations (Our Eastern PABU and the Western population of PABUs). Further reading on the subject can be found here <<http://www.aou.org/committees/nacc/proposals/2015-A.pdf>>, on page 28.

This split includes newer, exciting names such as Western Painted Bunting or even Eastern Painted Bunting (sarcasm)! What are all of your thoughts on the split?

--

Jack Rogers
Mt Pleasant, SC

2015-A-7 N&MA Classification Committee pp. 638-639
Split *Passerina pallidior* from Painted Bunting *P. ciris*

Background:

Passerina ciris, described by Linnaeus in 1758 as *Emberiza Ciris*, was considered by the 5th edition of the A.O.U. Checklist (1957) to consist of 2 subspecies: the nominate *ciris*, with a breeding range extending west from the southeast Atlantic Coast to about 96-97 degrees west longitude, and *P. c. pallidior* Mearns, 1911, with a breeding range in the United States from that line west to southeast New Mexico. The Texas and Oklahoma Breeding Bird Atlas maps (Bay 2004, Tweit 2007) do not show any change at 96-97 degrees. Currently, however, two breeding populations exist: one along the south Atlantic coast and the other primarily in Texas, Oklahoma, Louisiana, Arkansas, Kansas and northeast Mexico (Howell and Webb 1995, Sykes and Holtzman 2005, Sauer et al. 2014). These two allopatric populations are separated by a gap of about 550 km (Lowther et al. 1999). Texas, with 203 Breeding Bird Survey (BBS) routes on which this species has been detected, Louisiana with 85, and Oklahoma with 55 appear to contain a higher number of Painted Buntings than any other states, as their total of 343 is 69% of the 494 BBS routes in the United States on which this species was reported in 2012. Only Oklahoma and Texas have average relative abundances (buntings per route) as high as >10 buntings per 40 km route (Sauer et al. 2014).

Besides their allopatric breeding ranges, these two populations differ in several significant ways. The eastern population molts on the breeding grounds before flying south in late September to late October to winter in south Florida, the northern Bahamas, and Cuba. Birds of the western group migrate from Texas between June 30 and December 7 (peak late July – mid October) to fly to stop-over points in northwest Mexico to molt before resuming their migration to areas further south in Mexico and Central America (Oberholser 1974, Thompson 1991a, 1991b, Lowther et al. 1999). The 550 km gap between these two breeding areas and the differences in molt and migration strategies and winter ranges strongly support the reproductive isolation of these two populations and thus they deserve recognition as full species as proposed by Thompson (1991b) and Tweit (2007).

New information:

A recent study of 138 *Passerina ciris* individuals from 15 locations within the Atlantic coastal and interior breeding areas (Herr et al. 2011) shows the two populations described above to be evolving independently with no measurable gene flow between them. They apparently began diverging between 26,000 and 115,000 years ago from a common ancestor located within the present range of *P. pallidior*.

This additional information also redefines the species limits for these 2 populations from those proposed by Mearns (1911) as well as providing population estimates (41,000 for *P. ciris* and 1,500,000 for *P. pallidior* (Herr et al. 2011). A study of fall migrant *P. pallidior* individuals at a stop-over site in Sinaloa, Mexico (Rohwer 2013), explains the lengthy migration period. Most males apparently left the breeding grounds early in the fall cycle. In contrast, many females stayed in their breeding areas much longer to prepare a final brood for migration after their mates have departed (Rohwer 2013).

Recommendation:

Based on the data presented above, I propose *Passerina ciris* and *P. pallidior* be recognized as full species. Although these two taxa are still evolving genetically, as are all other species, the differences in breeding and winter ranges, molt strategies and migration tactics, bolstered by the lack of gene flow, prove these two species to be reproductively isolated.

I also propose the entries below for the checklist. The English names Eastern Painted Bunting and Western Painted Bunting were first given to these populations by Sibley and Monroe (1993).

Passerina ciris (Linnaeus). Eastern Painted Bunting.

Emberiza Ciris Linnaeus, 1758, Syst. Nat. (ed. 10) 1: 179. Based mainly on "The Painted Finch" Catesby, Nat. Hist. Carolina 1: 44, pl. (in America = South Carolina).

Habitat.—Semi-open situations containing scattered pine or oak trees, low shrubby plants and grassy or needle-covered areas of coastal plains and barrier islands.

Distribution.—*Breeds* along the southeast Atlantic coastal plain and barrier islands from southeast South Carolina to north Florida. Two tiny additional areas are present on the coasts of North Carolina and the Florida Panhandle.

Winters in south Florida, the northern Bahamas and Cuba (Sykes and Holtzman 2005, Sykes et al. 2007).

Notes.—This species and *P. pallidior* were formerly considered conspecific under the name *P. ciris*.

Passerina pallidior (Mearns) Western Painted Bunting.

Passerina ciris pallidior Mearns, Proc. Biol. Soc. Wash. 1911. 24: 217-218 (Fort Clark [= Bracketville], Kinney County, TX).

Habitat.—*Breeds* from near sea level to 1400 m in semi-open country with scattered bushes and trees and also along roadsides or stream-sides with tall brush and patches of grasses and forbs. The species is scarce where trees are sparse or too dense (Oberholser 1974). Nesting territories in Oklahoma contain a tree or shrub for the nest, song perches and a grassy area with shrubs for feeding (Parmelee 1959).

Winters in Costa Rica in dense, brushy second growth, overgrown pastures, tall grass, or riverside stands of wild cane (Stiles and Skutch 1989).

Migration In Arizona, thick riparian brush adjoining weedy fields (Rosenberg and Stejskal 1999).

Distribution.—*Breeds* in south-central United States and northeastern Mexico, with most abundant United States breeding occurring in Texas and Oklahoma, the only states with average relative abundances of >10 buntings per 40 km Breeding Bird Survey route (Sauer et al. 2014). Other states are Arkansas, Louisiana, southwestern Mississippi, eastern Kansas, southern Missouri, southeastern New Mexico and the Mexican states of Chihuahua, Coahuila and Nuevo Leon. Small areas were occupied in Alabama, Illinois and Tennessee (Howell and Webb 1995, Bay 2004, Sykes and Holzman 2005, Tweit 2007, Sauer et al. 2014). *Winters* in western and southern Mexico to western Panama (Stiles and Skutch 1989, Howell and Webb 1995).

Migration Individuals stop to molt in northwestern Mexico (Sonora and northern Sinaloa; Rohwer 2013) and rarely in southern Arizona (Rosenberg and Stejskal 1999), where most individuals present from late July to early October are brown juveniles.

Notes.—See note under *P. ciris*.

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