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Who wouldn't be happy seeing this Indigo Bunting in full plumage (Photo 1)

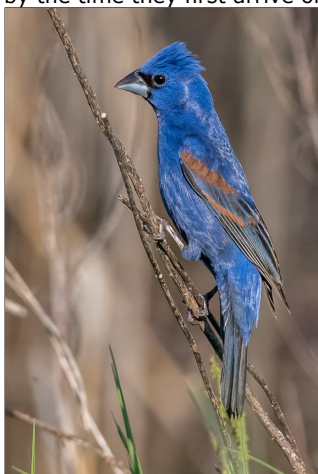
THE OTHER BLUE BIRDS

Whenever we think of the "Bluebird of Happiness," the bluebirds that come to mind are those beautiful bluebirds in the thrush family: the Eastern or Western Bluebirds with their beautiful blue back and wings, red breasts and white underbelly. Maybe out west, Mountain Bluebirds, also in the thrush family, with their all light blue bodies may come to mind. But no one (at least I never have) thinks of the true, all blue birds: the Indigo Bunting or Blue Grosbeak. It's about time those truly beautiful all-blue birds get some recognition. We have previously

discussed how the color blue permeates our human thinking, in "Color Me Blue," but now we give credit where it is due to the Indigo Bunting and Blue Grosbeak.

Interestingly, neither the Bunting nor the Grosbeak nest in St Lucie County as their breeding range begins in Northern Florida. Range maps show Blue Grosbeaks migrating through south Florida on their way north from Central and northern South America, but while I have never seen one in Florida there are a few eBird reports each year in the spring in south Florida, including St Lucie County. Indigo Buntings, however, do winter in south Florida, and we can see the entire molting process in the males, from drab brown to bright blue, although usually the final few brown feathers don't disappear until they arrive on their breeding grounds farther north.

The adult male in breeding plumage is a spectacular blue with a silver lower mandible and black upper mandible in the bill (*photo 1*). Conversely, the female and young males are a drab brown and almost impossible to tell apart. (*photo 2*). During the winter in Florida birders are able to observe the complete molting process as the males gradually develop their blue feathers, beginning with only a few (*photo 3*), and gradually growing progressively more blue feathers (*photos 4, 5 and 6*) until they seem to be almost 95% of the way to complete blue by the time they first arrive on their northern breeding grounds (*photo 7*) Note that the 95% almost breeding male Indigo Bunting still has a few brown feathers, does not yet have the complete silver and black bill, and still lacks the complete black facial mask of the fully breeding plumaged bird.



On the other hand, while the male Blue Grosbeak goes through the same color change from brown to bright blue, the change occurs primarily on their wintering grounds in Central and northern South America, so we in North America do not have the same opportunity to witness it as we do with the Indigo Bunting. Also, our winter home in Fort Pierce is just south of the Blue Grosbeak's southern-most breeding range, although they have

been found breeding in Okeechobee County just west of St Lucie County; and our summer home in southeastern Pennsylvania is just north of their northern most breeding range. However, Blue Grosbeaks are extending their range in both directions and summer birders in St Lucie County should be on the alert for them there. Up north, Blue Grosbeaks are common in nearby Delaware where these photos were taken.



The male Blue Grosbeak is a dark royal blue with prominent brown wing bars (*above, left*), but in flight, displays black tail feathers (*left*) rather than the bright blue tail feathers of the Indigo Bunting. The female Blue Grosbeak is brown, but has bright brown wing bars that help distinguish it from the female Indigo Bunting (*below, left*). In addition, Grosbeaks are

noticeably larger than Buntings.



So while these blue birds don't



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have the same press agents that get them into the songs, poems, and public perception that those popular thrush Bluebirds have, I hope maybe you will give these lovely birds some slight thought the next time you hear a reference to the "Bluebird of Happiness," or a "Bluebird on your shoulder," or "Bluebirds flying over a rainbow." After all, these are truly Blue Birds, and they do give us a lot of happiness.



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For more information see: Indigo Bunting in Florida: legacy.myfwc.com/bba/docs/bba_inbu.pdf; and Blue Grosbeak in Florida: legacy.myfwc.com/bba/docs/bba_blgr.pdf.