Fall Vagrancy of the Indigo Bunting in Northern Ontario

by
Alan Wormington

As a nesting species, the Indigo Bunting (*Passerina cyanea*) is found throughout southern Ontario, ranging north in northern Ontario to approximately Smooth Rock Falls (Cochrane District), Kenora (Kenora District) and Thunder Bay (Thunder Bay District). Although the Indigo Bunting is a widespread and common nesting species in the south, in northern Ontario it is absent from large areas between the above listed sites (Figure 1), and is very uncommon and local even within much of the specified range. As a fall migrant in southern Ontario, the species is a well-known early migrant, with the majority of birds having departed by late September (see Beardslee and Mitchell 1965:416-417; Sprague and Weir 1984:124). In northern Ontario, most breeding birds probably depart before early September, but actual observations have rarely, if ever, been reported.

As a result of numerous fall field trips to northern Ontario by the author and others, a number of Indigo Bunting observations have been obtained that represent birds that were at, or well beyond, the known breeding range of the species, and were observed on dates which are very late for the species. In this paper, these records are presented along with additional records, principally obtained from other observers who live in northern Ontario. Probable origin and a discussion of these records is also given.

The Records

A total of 20 records involving 20 birds have been assembled which pertain to late fall occurrences of Indigo Buntings in northern Ontario (Table 1). Of seven birds that could be aged and/or sexed, four were immatures, two were immature females and one was an adult male. Birds observed in the field were considered immatures if they showed fairly obvious, buffy wingbars and/or diffused streaking below, while the bird identified as an adult male (in winter plumage) lacked wing bars and streaking below, but showed obvious blue tones on the rump and flight feathers.

The 20 birds were found on dates ranging from 20 September to 24 November, with 19 of these birds first recorded between 20 September and 1 November. It should be noted that for the three birds that stayed after 1 November, and for the single bird first recorded on 11 November, all were at bird feeders and, as such, had probably been artificially induced to linger.

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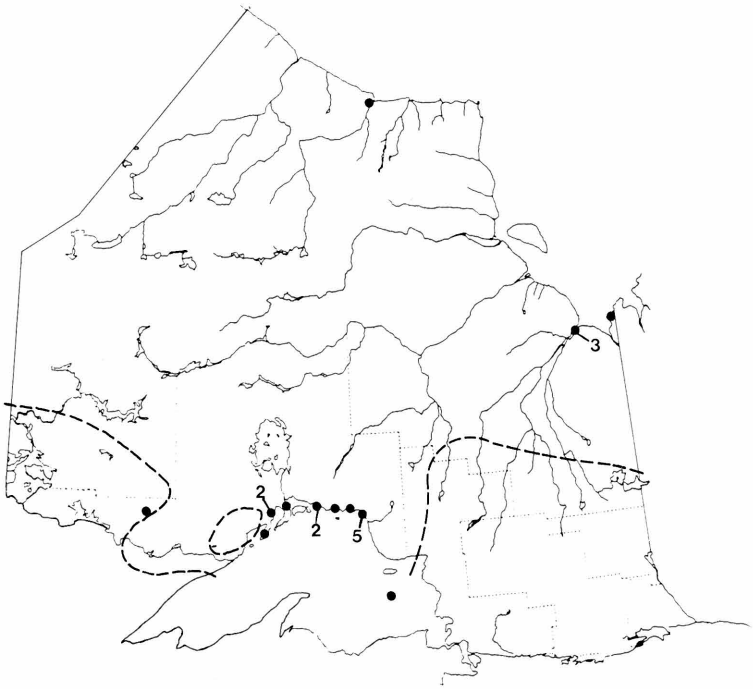

Figure 1: Distribution of the 20 late fall occurrences of Indigo Bunting in northern Ontario. The broken line represents the approximate northern limit of the species' breeding range (after Denis 1961; James *et al.* 1976:50; Godfrey 1986:502; and unpublished data).

The 20 birds were found in a variety of locations, but almost all were associated with human-influenced habitats or situations. These include birds found in small towns at weedy or disturbed sites (eight birds), at bird feeders in small towns (seven birds), and on gravel-based campsites in provincial parks (two birds). Only the three remaining individuals were found at totally natural sites (*i.e.*, two on shorelines and one on a small island).

Possible Origin of the Birds

There are several potential sources for the vagrant Indigo Buntings seen in northern Ontario. These are: (1) the birds were "over-shooting" spring migrants and simply remained until discovered, (2) the birds nested at the sites where they were found, (3) the birds' appearances were the result of post-breeding dispersal/wanderings, or (4) the birds were reverse fall migrants and arrived shortly before they were discovered.

Over-shooting spring migrants—This theory can quickly be ruled out as several of the birds recorded were immatures (young-of-the-year). Also, spring records far north of the breeding range (excluding the numerous records for Lake Superior) are possibly limited to the observation of a male bird on 6

May 1986 at Moosonee, Cochrane District (*American Birds* 40:466).
Nesting birds—This theory is unlikely, as most of the vagrants recorded were at, or beyond, the known breeding range. Furthermore, it seems unlikely that singing, territorial birds would be overlooked while, at the same location, silent, fall birds would be found.
Post-breeding dispersal—This theory is more difficult to dismiss and is a possible source of the birds. However, the apparent total lack of Indigo Bunting observations anywhere in northern Ontario between late August (breeding birds within their known range) and the first fall vagrants (late September, this study) are factors which clearly argue against this viewpoint.
Reverse fall migration—It is felt that this is the most probable source of the late fall Indigo Buntings in northern Ontario, namely that the birds are disoriented reverse migrants and arrived from the south shortly before they were discovered.

Analysis and Discussion

In comparing the northern Ontario observations to other areas of the continent, fall observations of vagrant landbirds at three Nova Scotia islands (McLaren 1981)

Table 1: Late fall occurrences of Indigo Bunting in northern Ontario.

Date	Location	#, Age & Sex	Observer(s)
20–21 Sept. 1961	Dorion, Thunder Bay Dist.	one — —	Rita Taylor
26 Sept. 1986	Red Rock, Thunder Bay Dist.	one imm. —	Wormington, William Lamond
1 Oct. 1976	Moose Factory, Cochrane Dist.	one — —	Mark W. Jennings
6 Oct. 1984	Moose Factory, Cochrane Dist.	one imm. —	Mark W. Jennings
7 Oct. 1980	Marathon, Thunder Bay Dist.	one — —	Nicholas G. Escott
11 Oct. 1980	Neys Prov. Park, Thunder Bay Dist.	one imm. —	Wormington
12 Oct. 1979	Caribou Island, Thunder Bay Dist.	one — —	Wormington, Robert G. Finlayson
12 Oct. 1985	East Point, Cochrane Dist.	one — —	R.D. McRae
13 Oct. 1976	Marathon, Thunder Bay Dist.	one — —	Nicholas G. Escott
13 Oct. 1982	Moosonee, Cochrane Dist.	one imm. —	R.D. McRae
13–16 Oct. 1986	Terrace Bay, Thunder Bay Dist.	one — —	Wormington *et al.*
15 Oct. 1973	Winisk, Kenora Dist.	one imm. ♀	Michael Hunter, Sr.; ROM #126213
18 Oct. 1982	Rossport, Thunder Bay Dist.	two — —[1]	Wormington, Mark W. Jennings
19 Oct. 1984	Marie Louise Lake, Thunder Bay Dist.	one adult ♂	Wormington
23 Oct. 1979	Marathon, Thunder Bay Dist.	one — —	Wormington
25 Oct.–3 Nov. 1959[2]	Dorion, Thunder Bay Dist.	one imm. ♀	Rita Taylor
1–6 Nov. 1979	Atikokan, Rainy River Dist.	one — —	David H. Elder, Wormington
28 Oct.–24 Nov. 1978	Marathon, Thunder Bay Dist. (two birds present 11–14 Nov.)	one — —	Nicholas G. Escott

[1] considered as two separate records since birds were not together and likely arrived independantly of each other.
[2] bird captured on last date, successfully kept indoors over the winter and released the following May.

provide excellent comparative data. When discussing the pattern of 'southern species in fall', McLaren lists Indigo Bunting as the fourth commonest fall vagrant to Brier, Sable and Seal islands (with a total of 102 records), after Dickcissel (*Spiza americana*) (119 records), Field Sparrow (*Spizella pusilla*) (139 records) and Brown Thrasher (*Toxostoma rufum*) (164 records). Through 1984, fall records of vagrant Indigo Buntings on these same three islands (I. McLaren, pers. comm., 1985) now total 177 birds. Remarkably—and very closely paralleling the northern Ontario occurrences—fully 175 of the 177 birds occurred from 21 September to 27 October inclusive, with but one bird recorded before these dates (14 August) and only one after (November 13), both from Sable Island. (Interestingly enough, a bird recorded at St. John's, Newfoundland, on 21–22 October 1982 (Bruce D. Mactavish, pers. comm., 1982), also fits neatly into this pattern of fall vagrancy.)

Looking at where in northern Ontario the records occurred (see Figure 1), it is probably more than coincidence that most of the birds found were in areas known to concentrate migrants (*e.g.,* shoreline areas of Lake Superior and James Bay), indicating that migration by the birds had recently taken place. Furthermore, as shown, the majority of birds occurred in areas influenced by humans. At the time of year when these birds occur, vast areas of northern Ontario are generally not favourable to Indigo Buntings in terms of providing preferred food and cover. However, sites such as weedy, overgrown sections of small towns, for example, located in otherwise extensive tracts of boreal forest, would attract and induce these birds to remain.

The above suggestion can be supported by comparing Indigo Bunting data for Thunder Bay with those from elsewhere on Lake Superior. There are no known late fall occurrences for the area immediately surrounding Thunder Bay (N.G. Escott, pers. comm., 1986), even though the species is an uncommon nester here and there is a long history of bird observation from this locality. In contrast, the shoreline east of Thunder Bay does not support breeding birds, but the records of late fall vagrants are numerous. There is no reason why late fall vagrants would not occur at Thunder Bay, but since the city is large and urbanized, with extensive areas of farms and farming communities surrounding the city, birds would certainly be difficult (and not likely) to be discovered. Lake Superior's north shore to the east of Thunder Bay consists of extensive wilderness tracts with only scattered small towns or tiny pockets of disturbed areas, thereby providing the ideal situation for finding vagrant Indigo Buntings.

The fall occurrence in northern Ontario of birds originating from southern or southwestern areas (and late in the season) is not unique to the Indigo Bunting. The pattern is also known for a number of other species; examples include the many records of Clay-colored Sparrow (*Spizella pallida*) and

Vesper Sparrow (*Pooecetes gramineus*) (unpublished data), the less frequent occurrences of Scissor-tailed Flycatcher (*Tyrannus forficatus*), Dickcissel, Field Sparrow and Lark Sparrow (*Chondestes grammacus*) (see various annual reports of the Ontario Bird Records Committee, 1982 to 1985 inclusive), and the unique records of Common Ground-Dove (*Columbina passerina*) (Freeman 1969; Dick and James 1969), Fork-tailed Flycatcher (*Tyrannus savana*) (*American Birds* 32:199), White-eyed Vireo (*Vireo griseus*) (Wormington, *in press*), Yellow-throated Warbler (*Dendroica dominica*) (McRae and Hutchison 1983), Hooded Warbler (*Wilsonia citrina*) (*Ontario Birds* 2:62), Cassin's Sparrow (*Aimophila cassinii*) (*Ontario Birds* 1:13) and Orchard Oriole (*Icterus spurius*) (Wormington and Lamond, *in press*). All of the above examples pertain to records of birds which occurred in the short time period from late September to late October.

Summary

The Indigo Bunting is a regular, fall vagrant to northern Ontario (almost certainly as a disoriented reverse migrant), with all 20 known records occurring late in the season. Fall vagrancy north of the breeding range throughout eastern North America is probably widespread, as indicated by the records presented here for northern Ontario and also by the abundant records for Nova Scotia.

The Indigo Bunting is one of many southern or southwestern species known to regularly occur as a vagrant in northern Ontario during fall migration, and in comparison to these other species is one of the most frequent.

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A Phenology of Ring-billed Gull Activities in Thunder Bay District

by

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The Ring-billed Gull (*Larus delawarensis*) is a rather common bird in Thunder Bay District, although it occurs in far fewer numbers here than in southern Ontario. Ring-bills have a limited breeding distribution in north-western Ontario. To date, colonies have been located in Lake-of-the-Woods (two colonies containing 6,000 and 100 pairs; B. Termaat, pers. comm.) and along the north shore of Lake Superior (100 pairs on Gravel Island and 5,000 pairs on Granite Island; pers. obs.) There are few documented nesting areas away from these two water bodies (Blokpoel and Tessier 1986).

This paper presents a chronology of Ring-billed Gull activity in and around the Thunder Bay District. Comparisons are made with the phenology of Ring-bills inhabiting the southern regions of the province.

In 1986, Ring-billed Gulls were first sighted in Thunder Bay on 30 March. By 20 April, they were scattered along the north shore of Lake Superior between Thunder Bay and Nipigon. The majority of the population, however, was clumped around the City of Thunder Bay. By the middle of April, courtship behaviour and aggressive displays became apparent. The first attempt at copulation was observed on 22 April.

By the last week of April, large numbers of adults had moved to the breeding colonies. At this time they usually pause at the mouths of rivers running into Lake

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