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FISH AS FOOD FOR INDIGO BUNTING NESTLINGS

Jessica C. Rutledge¹ and L. Mike Conner

*Joseph W. Jones Ecological Research Center, Rt. 2 Box 2324,
Newton, Georgia 39870*

¹Email: jessica.rutledge@jonesctr.org

The Indigo Bunting (*Passerina cyanea*) is a common songbird that breeds in eastern North America (Payne 1992). They typically nest in fields, edges of woods, roadsides, and railways. Nests are constructed using a variety of plant species and consist of an open cup of soft leaves, coarse grasses, stems, and strips of bark.

Females are the primary food provider to nestlings, but males have been observed feeding nearly fledged young (Sutton 1959; Morgan 1976; Carey and Nolan 1979; Westneat 1988; Payne 1989, 1992). There have not been any detailed studies of nestling food habits. However, a study in Michigan documented females bringing the following items to nestlings: grasshoppers from the ground, smooth green caterpillars from the woodland canopy, dragonflies, spiders, spider egg cases, and berries (Payne 1992).

We used videography as well as researchers' observations to determine nest fates of numerous bird species. During the three years of our study, 17 Indigo Bunting nests were monitored. Of these nests, 13 were monitored with videography. One especially interesting nest with two eggs was found in a cherry tree (*Prunus serotina*) on 27 July 2005. We estimated that incubation began on 29 July, based on recorded hatching and fledging dates. Both eggs hatched on 4 August, at which time the adult female began a regular feeding regime.



This nest was located in a hardwood depressional area close to Ichauway Notchaway Creek, which had flooded in March 2005. The flood waters extended into the depressional area where the nest was located. Spring and summer 2005 were extremely wet; thus, water remained in depressional areas that had been dry during previous years.

Uniquely, at this nest, the adult female was observed feeding a small fish to a nestling. The adult arrived at the nest at 15:51:01 hours on 17 August 2005. The nestling made an attempt to eat the fish at 15:51:09 hours. The adult female made several additional attempts to feed the fish to the same nestling. After the nestling tried unsuccessfully to swallow the fish, the adult took the fish back into her bill. She held the fish for 1 min 20 sec before giving it back to the same nestling. This time, the nestling successfully consumed the fish in 5 sec. The adult female removed the fecal sac from that nestling and flew away from the nest. Both nestlings fledged during the afternoon, 20 August 2005.

This account is the only recorded observation we have of an Indigo Bunting feeding a fish to a nestling. Based on the video of this event, we are not certain if the fish was alive when consumed by the nestling, but it appeared to exhibit movement. However, that movement might be attributed to movement by the adult bird. We believe that during the spring flooding, fish were trapped in isolated depressions, providing an easy to capture food source for the Indigo Bunting and other species.

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