

Lazuli Bunting
18 Jun 1958
Plymouth Co., IA
William Youngworth
Youngworth 1959

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REFERENCE

Youngworth, W. 1959. The Lazuli Bunting along the western border of Iowa: a summary. IBL 29:3-5.

VOTE (1981): 5-III, 1-V, 1-Hybrid

III, based on observer.

hybrid.

III, report by experienced observer of several records including song.

III, well described hybrid.

THE LAZULI BUNTING ALONG THE WESTERN BORDER OF IOWA: A SUMMARY

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A male Lazuli Bunting is a lovely thing to watch in the bright sun on the western prairies or mountains, but it seems even more beautiful when found on the farm lands of Iowa. It was a wonderful experience when I made my first Iowa observation on May 20, 1929. Since that day I have searched unceasingly to extend my observations of this bird on the western border of Iowa. The following account is a summary of my efforts.

The next observation of the Lazuli Bunting in Iowa was made by Mrs. Harold R. Peasley, Des Moines, Iowa, on July 25, 1935. This most interesting record was made near Indianola, Warren County, and was well verified two days later, July 27, by Mrs. Peasley and a group of observers consisting of Mrs. W. G. DuMont, Miss Olivia McCabe, and Mrs. John E. Stewart.

There was a long interval between the Warren County record and the next record along the western border of Iowa. This took place on May 16, 1948, when on the joint field trip of the Nebraska Ornithologists' Union and Iowa Ornithologists' Union at Sioux City, Mrs. Peasley again observed a male Lazuli Bunting—just across the Iowa border in South Dakota. This time her group consisted of Mrs. Janet DuMont, Dr. Chas. Stewart, Paul Leaverton, Mrs. Joseph Chamberlain and Dr. Telford Work.

To give the summary more completeness, the reader will please bear with me while I offer several other occurrences of the Lazuli Bunting near the western border of Iowa. These show that this species does nest near the Iowa border and is probably moving into Iowa.

The first observation is by Dr. Walter J. Breckenridge, on June 26, 1929. The place was in Minnesota near the Red River of the North and has been beautifully documented by Dr. Breckenridge in Occasional Papers: Number 3, University of Minnesota Museum of Natural History. The colored painting of a hybrid Indigo X Lazuli Bunting adds much to the paper. However, the most interesting point is that this western bunting was mated with a female Indigo Bunting, a fact which will be stressed later in this report.

While on a collecting trip to Yankton County, South Dakota, on July 4, 1933, I observed a normal pair of Lazuli Buntings going about their nesting duties. This record is given to point out the fact that Lazuli Buntings normally nest as near as 50 air miles from the Iowa border. I think this occurrence has been ignored or overlooked by many birders in this area.

The next Lazuli Bunting record in this general area was made during the first week of June, 1935. While the writer was camped near Spring Lake, Day County, South Dakota, on several successive mornings a male Lazuli Bunting was seen with two female buntings. One female was an Indigo Bunting and the other a Lazuli Bunting. On every occasion when the male Lazuli Bunting was flushed the two females would also flush. I was sorry I could not stay longer to determine whether both females started nest-building.

The late Dr. T. C. Stephens and I years ago agreed that locally a bird seen on either bank of the Big Sioux River, the boundary line between Iowa and South Dakota, would in the course of a day's activity fly back and forth across the river many times. If a bird were seen in the morning on the South Dakota bank, it could probably be expected on the Iowa bank by afternoon. With this agreement in mind I do not hesitate to give the following records.

On May 15, 1950, while on a field trip along the Big Sioux River, I found a male Lazuli Bunting on the South Dakota side of the river. This



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bird was singing almost constantly and was watched for a long time. On May 17, 1956, I accompanied William R. Felton, Jr., to his farm near the Missouri River. This is a few miles from Sioux City, but in South Dakota. On his farm we saw a male Lazuli Bunting in good plumage. It was feeding on canker worms.

On May 22, 1957, I returned to one of my favorite birding areas, the Big Sioux River near the Hunter Bridge. Among the many singing Indigo Buntings I was not surprised to find two fully plumaged Lazuli Buntings, also singing in fine form. I was again on the South Dakota side of the stream, but I knew that some day I would happen to be on the other side and would also find my Lazuli Buntings.

Twenty-nine years after I first reported the Lazuli Bunting in Iowa, I was again rewarded for my patient efforts by seeing a fully plumaged male Lazuli Bunting on the Iowa side of the Big Sioux River—May 14, 1958. The actual site was near the river just south of the DeHaan Mink Ranch. The bird was feeding with several singing Indigo Buntings in a large elm tree. The singing was my initial clue. This Lazuli Bunting was too busy feeding to sing. It was silent for most of the hour that I watched it. Repeated visits to the general area until mid-June failed to reveal the Lazuli Bunting as a summer resident and I feared that I would have to wait another year for a nesting. But I was wrong, as will be related below.

Many years ago I found a Clay-colored Sparrow in late May in a certain area of Plymouth County. Almost yearly I have visited that spot to determine if this sparrow does summer in northwest Iowa, but I have always met with failure. On June 18, 1958, I made my regular trip to this hillside pasture and after a long tramp I returned to the road. I heard a bunting sing and immediately I put my glass on it. Much to my surprise I saw that it was a Lazuli Bunting in somewhat different plumage and not an Indigo. By getting into the car and moving nearer to the bird, I was able to watch it at close range. My second look brought to mind the Breckenridge painting of a hybrid Lazuli X Indigo Bunting. I was quite satisfied that this was what I had singing before me, another hybrid. Excited chips about 15 feet from the road in a snowberry patch claimed my attention, and with

Dedication

The beautiful frontispiece accompanying this article represents two "firsts." It is the first colored plate to be published in our magazine, and the first colored painting that the artist, Earnest W. Steffen of Cedar Rapids, Iowa, has ever had published. Although he has made hundreds of bird paintings in color, this picture was painted expressly for Iowa Bird Life, to illustrate Mr. Youngworth's article on the Lazuli Bunting.

Mr. Youngworth, who has written more articles for our magazine than any other member and over a long period of years, underwrote the cost of the colored plate as a special contribution to the Iowa Ornithologists' Union.

We are proud to dedicate this issue of Iowa Bird Life to these two generous members—Earnest W. Steffen and William Youngworth.

them came calls from my singer. The two birds were undoubtedly mated, but the odd thing again was that this female bunting with nesting material in her beak was a normal female Indigo Bunting. Here was the Breckenridge Lazuli-Indigo Bunting nesting story all over again. The rest of the morning was spent in listening to my hybrid sing his sprightly song and watching his Indigo Bunting mate carrying nesting material to her partly finished nest.

The quest for the Lazuli Bunting in Iowa can be carried on by anyone willing to listen to every Indigo Bunting song and then trace it down during the course of the spring and summer season. One must listen to hundreds, even thousands, of such songs, as I have. Eventually the reward will be the recording of a Lazuli Bunting. I think this species has been overlooked in Iowa. I believe that intensive field work will reveal it is possibly a regular summer resident in western Iowa.

The question of how to identify a hybrid Lazuli X Indigo Bunting may cause some observers to wonder a bit, but a good, close look will reveal the almost complete lack of usual tawny color, which appears on the breast of a normal Lazuli Bunting male, and the rather indefinite white wing-bars. The shadings of the various blues are noticeable in the hand. However, for a really fine description of this hybrid one must refer to Dr. Breckenridge's paper. I took a hybrid Lazuli X Indigo Bunting on June 1, 1932, in Cherry County, Nebraska, and feel quite sure the sight record in Plymouth County was the same sort of hybrid.

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