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Blue Upon Blue: The Indigo-bird

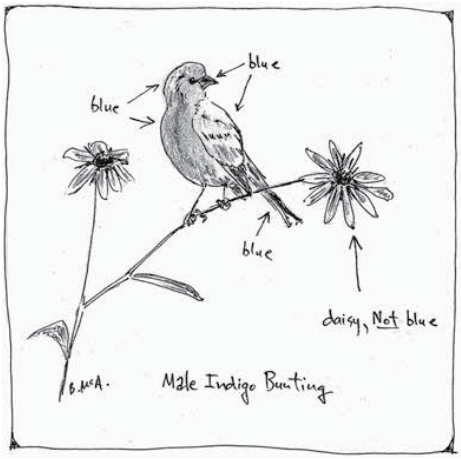
"Oh, I have never seen a bluebird up so close!" Our old family friend and his partner were the first guests here for a meal since before Covid. They had made a day trip from urban settings south of us.

We have a bird feeder right outside the kitchen window and there at lunchtime was the blue bird, or more specifically, a blue bird. Some writers use upper case-letters for the common name of a particular species. I used to, and am still on the fence about this. You can only use so many caps per paragraph before weariness sets in for most readers. Annoyance, even.

In speech the difference between a practical adjective and a specific name gets even more exciting. When is a blue bird not an Eastern Bluebird? Sometimes, it is! But this time the bird was what Henry Thoreau called an ""indigo-bird." I am not enough of a Thoreau scholar to know who chose the lower-case for the species name. Was it the writer, in 1851, or some more recent editor? It does not matter, as long as we know what we mean and can get this across.

"No, it is not a bluebird," we told our visitor, even though it plainly was. Then we explained that it was, and yet it was not. So the conversation went, with more wit than birdlore. Meanwhile, that indigo bunting stayed and stayed, wolfing down birdseed. He was unperturbed by other birds, most bigger than he was. He comes every day, any time, and the jays, woodpeckers, and mourning doves work around him. He is always the only indigo bunting on the scene.

This bunting is truly all blue, even the bill, which is darker on the upper mandible, paler on the lower. The eggs are blue, though sometimes so pale as to be described as "bluish-white." There are three or four eggs in a clutch, and the nest is built low in bushes or shrubbery, though sometimes as high up as ten feet in an old orchard tree.



These buntings migrate here for summer breeding, but spend winters much farther south. They often fly at night, and are thought to navigate by the stars. Somehow, using planetariums and caged birds, folks have experimented to confuse the birds by altering star patterns. Certain patterns make the caged birds want to fly. They get very restless. But these birds can find their way on overcast nights, so the theories have expanded to include other things like landmarks and the earth's electromagnetic field. Theories even include the likelihood of mistakes which are later corrected.

Indigo buntings weigh about half an ounce and they eat all sorts of insects when they live in these parts in the summer: caterpillars, small beetles, grasshoppers. In the south in winter, they eat a variety of seeds. At our house, they are fine with birdseed in summer.

The male indigo-bird is the indigo one. The female is subtle, brown with a paler breast and sometimes some streaks. It is she who selects the nest site, builds the nest, incubates, and feeds the youngsters. It is also she who selects the male, and she is looking for someone with a promising territory, one which will support her and her young. In other words, a place with plenty of greenery, because she needs food that is rich in protein, which is to say insects. Insects can be found where there are lots of leaves and flowers. The male and female buntings are working partners, specialists on a team. She needs the kind of food that makes for great strong viable eggs and she is also looking for a good grocery store nearby with a supply to nourish those growing chicks. In the winter, down south, with pregnancy and childrearing not her job any more, she can get by very well on seeds.

The male can eat seeds any time of year, as long as he has the strength to migrate, and to defend his territory once he gets north. He has to be visible (so blue!) and audible. *The Peterson Field Guide to Eastern Birds*, not given to excited prose, says this. "Voice: Song, lively high and strident, with well-measured phrases at different pitches: notes usually paired: sweet-sweet, chew-chew, etc. Note, a sharp thin spit."

Indigo buntings are polygynous, which means one male mates with more than one female, and each female only mates with one male. The female chooses the male, who does not help with raising the young and sometimes has other mates. But this male is a rich guy: he has an excellent territory. It is so good, it can support more than one family. His job is to find this place and then defend and advertise it with song. Edward Howe Forbush, State Ornithologist for Massachusetts, wrote:

"The male seems to delight in singing during the hottest part of the summer day, when other birds are resting in the shade. He will sing his way from the bottom of a tree to the top, going up branch by branch until he has reached the topmost spire, and there, fully exposed to the blazing sun, he will sing and sing and sing." (*Birds of Massachusetts and other New England States*, 1929)

The male indigo bunting must be wonderfully blue. He must find a territory that attracts females and feeds families. He must also sing and sing and sing. We all have our work in the world. — Bonner McAllester