



July-August

A Bird Bander's Diary

by
Ralph K. Bell

May 14 Received a very interesting letter today from David Johnston, a professor at the University of Florida. It adds much to the circumstances surrounding the unusual recovery of an Indigo Bunting in Jamaica. The letter contains so much information that I feel it should be reproduced in its entirety.

Dear Mr. Bell:

As you have no doubt heard by now, one of your banded Indigo Buntings has been seen in Montego Bay, Jamaica. This is, of course, a phenomenal recovery, the first long-distance recovery for this species.

Because I have been working with Mrs. Downer on this species for several years, I thought I'd write you and pose a few questions. First, you'll probably be interested in knowing the details of the recovery. She has a feeding platform only a few yards from a bedroom window where she has mounted a 20X spotting scope. On April 17, along with numerous color-banded buntings (birds she had been catching in a mist net) there appeared a female not color-banded. Mrs. Downer read its aluminum band number through her telescope (61-68274) and immediately knew this wasn't one of her band numbers. Nor did it belong to any other bander in Jamaica. Although her mist nets were set up, she did not catch the bird, but it did remain for a few days, then suddenly disappeared along with numerous other buntings, probably in a migratory flight back toward the U. S.

We are wondering if you remember anything specific about this bird that you banded on September 29, 1963. I presume it was an autumnal migrant and that you did not record either sex or age.

If there is any regular flight between Jamaica and your area, perhaps you and your bander-friends should be on the look-out for color-banded Indigo Buntings for you could obtain one of the many birds she has color-banded. Most of her birds have color-band combinations, such as red over white on one leg and aluminum band on the other. Thus, even if you saw a bunting and could not catch



Above - Seth Low water drip trap where Indigo Bunting No. 61-68274 was captured and banded. Looking north along Multiflora Rose hedge. An excellent trap location.

Below - Looking south along the same hedge. Seth Low trap is near patch of woods in distance. A few of our Christmas tree crop are visible.



it, the color-band combination would be of some assistance. I too am color-banding Indigo Buntings here in north Florida, though I doubt that any of my birds would move northward into your area.

This is an exciting recovery. Perhaps with luck there will be more.

Yours, sincerely,

David W. Johnston

The recovery of this Indigo Bunting helps prove a pet theory of mine that the first net captures in the spring indicate migration direction for that species. Since the area immediately to the north of us is open farm land, many migration birds are apparently funneled through our yard (with its many trees). Nets are placed so that they run north and south. I have always noticed that the first migrants of many species seem to hit the nets from the same direction year after year. I am now keeping a directional record for each bird as it is banded especially those that hit the nets soon after dawn before any feeding and resting take place. Someday I want to do a paper on this.

The books say the Indigo Bunting winters in Cuba and Central America. The first migrant Indigo Buntings arriving here in the spring hit the nets as though they were coming from the southeast, and this is collaborated by the recovery in Jamaica. Another incident happened on the evening of May 2, 1962, that makes me think our buntings winter in the West Indies and come up the east coast. I was making the last check of the nets at the lower end of the farm (just at dusk) when I looked up and saw 3 male Indigo Buntings (my first of the season) dropping down out of the sky coming from the southeast and flying toward the bushy area where I had my nets. It was almost dark and I immediately walked over in the direction that they had flown. By chance the nets (also running north and south) were in the right place and all 3 were netted and banded.

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