

## THE PRACTICED EYE

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*Photographs from VIREO*



# Blue Grosbeak and Indigo Bunting

**A**S A YOUNG BIRDER IN THE MID-west, one of the first challenges that I tackled was learning to separate the Indigo Bunting (*Passerina cyanea*) from the Blue Grosbeak (*Guiraca caerulea*). It was not much of a challenge, really. I thought I had it licked in no time, and thereafter I scarcely looked at these birds. After all, I reasoned, if I were going to become a hot birder, I couldn't waste time on such common species. The payoff came—as it often does for hot young birders—when I encountered one of these birds in changing plu-



*Indigo Bunting. This fresh-plumaged bird shows obvious cinnamon-brown edgings in the wings, forming a suggestion of two wing-bars. Photograph/Crawford H. Greenewalt/VIREO (g02/23/338).*



*Female Indigo Bunting. Photograph/Barth Schorre/VIREO (s08/11/038).*



*Indigo Bunting, probably a one-year-old male. Superficially this bird appears to have two rusty-brown wing-bars. Photograph/Barth Schorre/VIREO (s08/7/161).*



*Blue Grosbeak, probably a young male, although some adult females can show more blue than this. Compare the two wing-bars. Photograph/Barth Schorre/VIREO (s08/6/120).*

mage, in odd light, and had no idea which one it was.

In subsequent years I was stymied again by other “easy” birds, and gradually came to the conclusion that experienced birders really should study the common birds, to try to know them from A to Z. Even if we’ve never had trouble separating two similar birds, it’s always worthwhile to study and review the differences between them. This “Practiced Eye” reviews

our two widespread blue finches.

The Blue Grosbeak is primarily a southern bird, but it wanders north, with spring overshoots reaching southeastern Canada almost every year. The Indigo Bunting was once entirely an eastern bird, but in recent decades it has extended its range and it is now expected in many parts of the west. Either species might now be considered a good possibility anywhere over the southern two-thirds of

the continent.

Shades of blue in feathers are notoriously difficult to classify, changing with every shift of light. Still, the males of these two species do differ in overall color. The Indigo Bunting is (appropriately) a deeper indigo-blue, with iridescent overtones; with changes in lighting it can reflect traces of purple, light blue, or blue-green. The male Blue Grosbeak is a less variable purplish-blue. In dull light it can



*Male Blue Grosbeak. Photograph/Barth Schorre/VIREO (s08/11/026).*



*Male Indigo Bunting in breeding plumage. Photograph/Barth Schorre/VIREO (s08/9/031).*



*Female Blue Grosbeak. Photograph/Barth Schorre/VIREO (s08/6/111).*

(like the Indigo Bunting) look flat black, but it rarely shows other variations on its basic color.

A plumage difference between the two that is only occasionally helpful involves the mask of the male grosbeak: from the base of the bill back to the eye, and down along the base of the lower mandible to the chin, the feathers are black. The male bunting does not have this, but the blue of its head is so dark that it frequently does

give the illusion of having black lores.

The best-known field mark for separating the two is the presence of two rusty wing-bars on the Blue Grosbeak. This is quite valid, but an oversimplified approach to it can be misleading. The lower wing-bar on the Blue Grosbeak is formed by rufous tips on the dark greater coverts, while the upper one is formed by the median coverts, which are mostly rufous. (The lower wing-bar is both narrower and often

paler than the upper one.) In the male Indigo in full breeding plumage, these areas of the wing are the same blue as the body feathers. However, Indigos in other plumages have pale brown or cinnamon-brown edgings in the wings, and a molting male can easily seem to be a blue bird with brown wing-bars.

These birds are at their blue best in summer. A partial molt on the breeding grounds in late summer changes

their appearance before they begin their southward migration. In Indigo Bunting the change is dramatic, as it molts into a winter (basic) plumage that is entirely brown, with or without blue tinges. Winter plumage in the adult male Blue Grosbeak is the same as summer plumage, but with brown edgings on the feathers at first that wear away to leave the solid blue exposed by the following spring.

Females of both species are brown, with touches of blue when they are adult. The general shade of brown is

female bunting's wing-bars are not as striking as those of the female grosbeak, she does usually have them, except in very worn plumage. When the bunting is in such worn plumage—as in midsummer—the streaks on the chest are likely to be obscure. Some individuals are relatively unstreaked even in fresh plumage.

A female Indigo Bunting that has wing-bars but lacks obvious streaking may bring to mind the female Lazuli Bunting of western North America. However, the female Lazuli usually

Grosbeak is a heavier bird with a thick bill, a chunky body, and a tail that seems proportionately wide and short. Either species may raise the crown feathers, but when they do, the impression of a crest is more pronounced on the grosbeak. The common callnotes are also distinctive: a hard *spitk* in the bunting and a loud, metallic *tink* in the grosbeak. Both species also give a short buzzy note, *bzzt*. The grosbeak's version of this is a bit longer and lower-pitched, and can be distinguished with practice.



Female Lazuli Bunting at the nest. Photograph/Helen Cruickshank/VIREO (c03/7/660).

quite variable, especially on autumn and winter birds. The female grosbeak is often depicted as a richer or warmer brown than the bunting, but this is not a reliable difference, as either species can range from rusty-brown to very dull.

Well-known field marks for separating female-plumage Indigo Buntings and Blue Grosbeaks include the wing-bars of the female grosbeak and the streaks on the chest of the female bunting, but variation affects the usefulness of these marks. Although the

has more contrasty wing-bars, and a buffy or pale cinnamon wash from the throat down onto the chest, and its rump and upper tail coverts are of a blue-gray shade that contrasts with the brown back. Any blue that shows up in its plumage is likely to be a paler sky-blue than on the Indigo Bunting.

So far, in discussing Blue Grosbeak and Indigo Bunting, we have not touched on the most obvious differences between them: differences in shape. Indigo Bunting is a slim, trim finch of average proportions. Blue

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