Indigo Bunting

Passerina cyanea

A familiar and widespread summer resident throughout Ohio, nesting Indigo Buntings are found wherever "there is a fair amount of brush" (Trautman 1940). They are common residents in abandoned fields dominated by shrub/sapling stage vegetation and thrive on the red cedar covered hillsides of the southwestern counties. Brushy corridors along fencerows, roadsides, and railroads support numerous breeding pairs. These buntings are also regularly found along brushy woodland edges and openings, and within the interiors of disturbed woodlands characterized by open canopies and dense undergrowth. They become scarce in urban areas, although a few pairs can be found near the center of cities within vacant lots, cemeteries, and narrow wooded corridors bordering streams and railroads.

The versatile Indigo Bunting was widely distributed during the Atlas Project. They were recorded from every priority block except one within the Lake Plain physiographic region. Based on Breeding Bird Survey data, these buntings are most numerous in the Illinoian Till Plain and Unglaciated Plateau regions where brushy habitats are widespread. Their numbers noticeably decline in the other regions. Surprisingly, Indigo Buntings are nearly equally numerous in the Glaciated Plateau region as in the more intensively farmed Lake Plain and Till Plain regions.

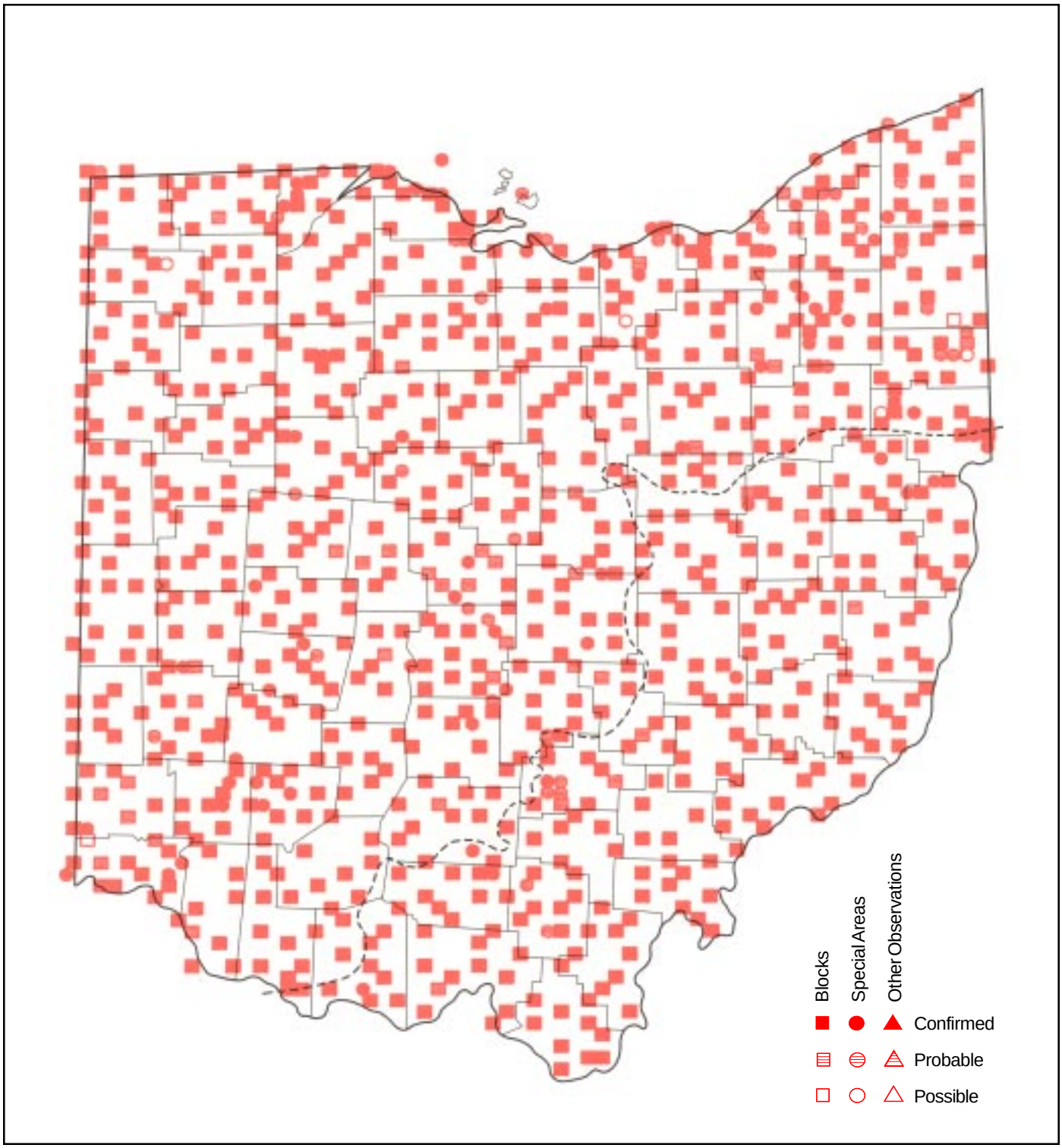
Breeding Indigo Buntings were confirmed in 93.1% of the Atlas Project priority blocks. This high rate of confirmation is a result of their abundance within Ohio as the "30" code was used in 524 blocks. This code was repeatedly utilized in every physiographic region: 193 Till Plain blocks, 168 Unglaciated Plateau blocks, 80 Glaciated Plateau blocks, 58 Lake Plain blocks, and 25 Illinoian Till Plain blocks. Other confirmed breeding records included observations of adults carrying food for young in 68 priority blocks, 53 active nests, 29 reports of the distraction displays of adults, and recently fledged young in 25 blocks. Most of the remaining records pertained to probable breeders, primarily territorial males and pairs in suitable habitats.

Indigo Buntings have been widespread summer residents in Ohio since the 19th century. Jones (1903) described their statewide status as "common to almost abundant" with breeding pairs occupying "any sort of thicket." Hicks (1935) noted they were also common to abundant residents in every county. They were most numerous along the Allegheny Plateau where the largest numbers were present in Scioto, Pike, and Muskingum counties during the 1930s (Hicks 1937). Their status has not changed during subsequent decades. Local declines may have occurred in some intensively farmed counties, but these declines have been offset by increased numbers elsewhere. In fact, breeding populations exhibited significant increases throughout the Great Lakes region, including Ohio, between 1965 and 1979 (Robbins, C. S., et al. 1986).

Tim Daniel - Division of Wildlife

Most Indigo Bunting nests are placed in woody cover, usually upright forks in shrubby thickets and small saplings. However, some pairs utilize dense herbaceous vegetation. Their well–made nests are normally expertly concealed and fairly difficult to discover. Typical nest heights are less than four feet above the ground, although some may be as high as 10–20 feet (Trautman 1940, Peck and James 1987).

Within Ohio, nest construction normally begins during the second half of May. The earliest published egg date is May 27 (Trautman 1940), although earlier clutches are likely within the southern counties. The first fledglings have appeared by June 21 (Trautman 1940), and most first broods are noted between June 25 and July 15. This species regularly produces two broods annually. The latest published egg date is August 6, but later clutches are likely since nest construction has been noted through August 15 (Phillips 1980). Nests with young have been reported as late as September 5 (Trautman 1940), and have produced recently fledged young into mid–September.



Analysis of Block Data by Physiographic Region

Physiographic Region	Total Blocks Surveyed	Blocks with Data	% with Data	Regional % for Ohio	Ave. # Individ per BBS Route (1982–1987)
Lake Plain	95	94	99.0	12.3	13.8
Till Plain	271	271	100.0	35.5	17.4
Ill. Till Plain	46	46	100.0	6.0	39.2
Glaciated Plateau	140	140	100.0	18.4	13.9
Unglaciated Plateau	212	212	100.0	27.8	38.3

Summary of Breeding Status

No. of Blocks in Which Species Recorded		
Total	**763**	**99.9%**
Confirmed	710	93.1%
Probable	51	6.7%
Possible	2	0.3%