

**California Wildlife Habitat Relationships System**  
**California Department of Fish and Wildlife**  
**California Interagency Wildlife Task Group**

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INDIGO BUNTING

*Passerina cyanea*

Family: CARDINALIDAE  
B809

Order: PASSERIFORMES

Class: AVES

Written by: T. Kucera, 1998

#### DISTRIBUTION, ABUNDANCE, SEASONALITY

Mainly a bird of the eastern, deciduous forests; has expanded its range westward. Rare but regular spring transient in the eastern deserts and along the coast (Small 1994). Rare fall migrant along the coast and on offshore islands. Summer territorial males are rare but increasing in scattered coastal and near-coastal valleys the length of the state. Largest number along the South Kern River (Small 1994). May pair and hybridize with lazuli buntings, from which they were formerly isolated by the Great Plains (Sibley and Short 1959, Emlen et al. 1975, Short 1994).

#### SPECIFIC HABITAT REQUIREMENTS

**Feeding:** Feeds on small seeds, buds, and insects in winter in a variety of weedy fields, citrus orchards, and weedy cropland. In breeding season, feeds on small spiders, insects, and berries in brushy or weedy habitats along the edges of cultivated lands, woods, power line rights-of-way, and weedy cultivated fields (Payne 1992).

**Cover:** Little information specific to California. Based on areas in eastern North America, indigo buntings inhabit a variety of weedy, brushy, second-growth habitats.

**Reproduction:** Predominantly monogamous; builds nest in tangle of low, brushy vegetation (Erlich et al. 1987, Payne 1992).

**Water:** Drinks infrequently; may obtain sufficient water from insects and berries (Payne 1992).

**Pattern:** Transient in a wide variety of lowland, brushy or weedy habitats.

#### SPECIES LIFE HISTORY

**Activity Patterns:** Yearlong, diurnal activity.

**Seasonal Movements/Migration:** Neotropical migrant. Winters from southern Mexico and Caribbean to northern South America (Payne 1992). Extremely rare in California in winter (Short 1994).

**Home Range:** No information found. Occur in flocks at night in winter; forage individually or in small groups during daylight.

**Territory:** Territorial in breeding season. Territory sizes averaged 1.4 ha in Michigan, but can vary from 0.4 to 8 ha (Payne 1992).

**Reproduction:** Predominantly monogamous, but some proportion of a population is polygynous (Carey and Nolan 1979, Payne 1982). Extra-pair copulations are common, resulting in 20-40% of young fathered by males that are not the female's mate (Westneat 1987).

Niche: Little information; probably preyed upon by sharp-shinned hawks, ravens, and other common nest predators, and parasitized by brown-headed cowbirds.

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Life history accounts for species in the California Wildlife Habitat Relationships (CWHR) System were originally published in: Zeiner, D.C., W.F.Laudenslayer, Jr., K.E. Mayer, and M. White, eds. 1988-1990. *California's Wildlife*. Vol. I-III. California Department of Fish and Game, Sacramento, California. Updates are noted in accounts that have been added or edited since original publication.