

Painted Bunting (*Passerina ciris*)

NMPIF level: Biodiversity Conservation Concern, Level 1 (BC1)

NMPIF assessment score: 14

NM stewardship responsibility: Low

National PIF status: Watch List

New Mexico BCRs: 18, 35

Primary breeding habitat(s): Middle Elevation Riparian, Chihuahuan Desert Shrub

Other habitats used: Agricultural

Summary of Concern

Painted Bunting is a migratory songbird of the south-central and southeastern United States, which has shown steady long-term population declines. The New Mexico population is limited to scattered locations in the south and east containing a mix of riparian and desert shrub vegetation.

Associated Species

Northern Bobwhite, Gambel's Quail, Ash-throated Flycatcher, Yellow-billed Cuckoo (BC1), Western Kingbird, Bewick's Wren, Northern Cardinal, Blue Grosbeak, Bullock's Oriole (SC2)

Distribution

Painted Bunting is a migratory species that breeds primarily in the south-central United States. Its breeding range extends from the Mississippi Valley west to Oklahoma, Texas, and New Mexico, and south to northern Mexico. A separate breeding population exists along the Atlantic Coast from North Carolina south to central Florida. Western populations migrate to staging areas in southern Arizona and northern Mexico to undergo prebasic molt, then continue south to winter along the Pacific slope of Mexico and in Central America (Lowther et al. 1999).

In New Mexico, Painted Buntings occur primarily in riparian oases and surrounding desert shrub habitat in the southeast. Locations include Rattlesnake Springs and other areas along the lower Pecos River valley in Eddy County, and near Jal in Lea County. The species also breeds, less commonly, in the Rio

Grande valley south of Hatch (Hubbard 1978, Parmeter et al. 2002). A small but possibly expanding population exists along the Canadian River valley from Tucumcari to Conchas Lake.

Ecology and Habitat Requirements

Painted Buntings occupy open riparian areas and shrub habitats. In Texas and Oklahoma, habitat includes woodland strips between overgrown fields, semiopen shrubland with scattered bushes and trees, tall roadside or streamside brush, and patches of tall grasses and forbs. They avoid areas where trees are either too scarce or too dense (Parmelee 1959, Oberholser 1974). In Texas, they favor wooded areas in otherwise open habitat. In comparison to Indigo Buntings, Painted Buntings were associated with smaller, more numerous, and more heterogeneous stands of trees (Kopachena and Crist 2000). They decreased sharply in abundance in areas of streamside riparian habitat greater than 20 m wide (Conner et al. 2004).

In southeast New Mexico, Painted Buntings are locally common in and around pockets of riparian vegetation and surrounding grass and shrub habitats. They often nest in open mesquite shrublands. Elsewhere, Painted Buntings may use shelter belts and hedgerows adjacent to open fields and mesquite grasslands. This species is present in New Mexico from May through September. Nests are generally placed less than 8 feet off the ground in mesquite, hackberry, or other desert shrub. Painted Buntings may also nest in orchard trees (Ligon 1961). Typical clutch size is 3 or 4, and 2 broods per season may be raised. Nest parasitism by Brown-headed Cowbirds is a problem for this species. Painted Buntings forage on the ground for seeds, and more broadly for insects during the breeding season (Lowther et al. 1999).

Conservation Status

Species Assessment

DISTRIBUTION	4
THREATS	4
GLOBAL POPULATION SIZE	3
LOCAL POPULATION TREND	2
IMPORTANCE OF NEW MEXICO TO BREEDING	1
COMBINED SCORE	14

Painted Bunting is a Biodiversity Conservation Concern, Level 1 species for New Mexico, with a total assessment score of 14. From NMPIF, it receives a score of 4 for threats to breeding in the state.

Although NMPIF assigns a low score for local population trend, nationally PIF assigns a score of 5 for population trend, which helps raise this species to Watch List status. At the continental level, it receives a high PIF vulnerability score of 4 for its small breeding season distribution. Painted Bunting is a U.S. Fish and Wildlife (2002) national Bird of Conservation Concern.

Population Size

PIF estimates a species population of 4.5 million. Size of the New Mexico population is unknown, and no estimates based on BBS are available. Outside of New Mexico, breeding densities of 7-10 pairs per 100 ha reported from several locations (Lowther et al. 1999).

Population Trend

No BBS data are available for New Mexico. Range-wide BBS data show Painted Buntings have declined 1.9% annually from 1966-2004 ($p=0.00$). The same trend is evident in FWS Region 2. However, since 1980, western populations have been somewhat more stable. The small New Mexico population appears to be stable or increasing.

Threats

Reasons for the range-wide population decline in this species are unknown, but loss of habitat is thought to be the primary cause (Lowther et al. 1999). In New Mexico, Painted Buntings are patchily distributed and vulnerable to loss or degradation of riparian areas along the Pecos River and elsewhere. Cowbird parasitism may be limiting reproductive success. Loss of riparian areas in Arizona and northern Mexico, where the western population stops during migration in order to molt, may be a bottleneck affecting population numbers (Lowther et al. 1999).

Management Issues and Recommendations

Management for Painted Bunting in New Mexico should focus on preservation and enhancement of quality riparian and adjacent shrub habitat in the southeast part of the state.

NMPIF Recommendations

- Protect and maintain riparian corridors and oases in the Pecos River valley south of Carlsbad.

- Patchy and/or narrow riparian corridors with a surrounding belt of fairly dense tall shrubs (>2m) or other woody vegetation, such as hackberry or soapberry, may be optimal for this species.

Species Conservation Objectives

NMPIF Objectives

- Increase population at Rattlesnake Springs to pre-1988 levels: 8 breeding pairs.
- Increase the number of regular breeding locations in southeast New Mexico.
- Seek to better understand local population trends and impacts of cowbird parasitism.

Sources of Information

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