

## Blue Grosbeak *Passerina caerulea*



**Folk Name:** Big Indigo

**Status:** Breeder

**Abundance:** Fairly Common to Common

**Habitat:** Old fields full of saplings, brushy thickets, forest edge

The Blue Grosbeak is a neotropical migrant that winters in Mexico and parts of Central and South America. It returns each spring to breed in fields, meadows, and brushy pastures scattered throughout the southern and central United States, where it feeds on insects and seeds. It is a widespread breeding bird in both Carolinas, but it is less well known than the smaller and similar-looking Indigo Bunting.

“Big Indigo” is one folk name given to this beautiful deep-blue bird. At 6 ¾ inches it averages about 1 ¼ inches larger than the common Indigo Bunting which is also an all-blue bird. The male Blue Grosbeak is less bright blue overall than the Indigo Bunting, and it has a larger head, heavier bill, and two wide rufous wing bars. The brown females may show a hint of blue on the wing and rump and a dull rufous wing bar. When seen at the wrong angle or in poor light, this “blue” bird appears all black.

Most Blue Grosbeaks return to the Carolina Piedmont from their tropical wintering grounds in mid-April.



Blue Grosbeak male (Jeff Maw). Nest. (MCPRD staff)



J F M A M J J A S O N D

Our earliest arrival date on file for this region is 5 April. Males establish breeding territories and nesting quickly begins. This species often has two broods, and young may be found as late as August. Most Blue Grosbeaks have departed this region by mid-October. We have only two reports on file for the months of November through March. Both are from Christmas Bird Counts. A Blue Grosbeak was reported on the Stanly count held December 31, 1966. The bird was “studied at close range” and described as a “most unusual find.” A female Blue Grosbeak was reported on the Charlotte Christmas Bird Count conducted on December 30, 1972. David Wright discovered this wintering bird, described as “possibly a bird of the year,” in a thicket bordered by an open field on one side and a gravel road on the other.

In 1878, Leverett Loomis designated the Blue Grosbeak a “common” summer breeding bird in Chester County. He wrote that it:

Frequents streams skirted by willows or recent growth, partially cleared fields, edges of woods, etc.; often found in cultivated fields and about dwellings, occasionally in groves, very rarely in dense woodland. Nest in two instances have been found in scrubby growth near houses; one within thirty yards of the piazza, by a constantly travelled path. Not timid; resents intrusion with much volubility.

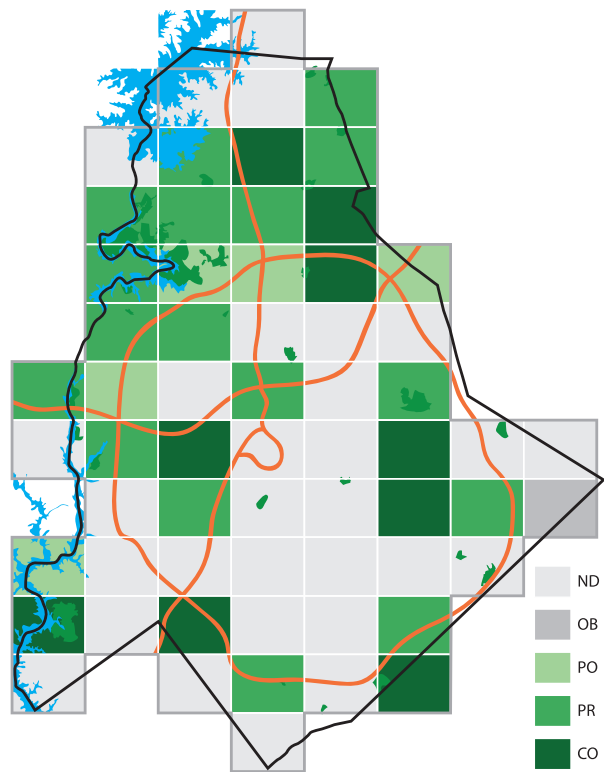
A specimen Loomis collected in Chester County on May 10, 1890, is housed in the bird collection at Harvard University.

Frank Sherman reported “several seen” in Monroe in Union County, NC, on July 1, 1922. E.M. Hoffman reported a Blue Grosbeak in Salisbury on May 7, 1921, and on May 3, 1924. Elmer Brown provided a Charlotte nest record from May 28, 1925. William McIlwaine of Charlotte wrote: “On June 24 [1926] I saw a pair of

blue grosbeaks. Evidently I was near their home. I was in a tangle of vines by a creek. The tangle climbed up into some trees. My notion is that their nest was in that tangle.” In 1941, Charlie Sellers noted the Blue Grosbeak arriving in Charlotte by 27 April and that this species was a “common” breeding bird there.

In 1945, Rhett Chamberlain reported finding second broods in the month of August. He wrote: “On August 11, about 15 miles south of Charlotte, I watched a well grown brood of Blue Grosbeaks being escorted by a parent. I saw another brood of these birds in the same locality on August 19.”

Our peak one-day count is a total of 37 birds tallied on the Charlotte Spring Bird Count in 1967.



### **Mecklenburg County Breeding Bird Atlas:**

*Fairly Widespread (PR/17, CO/9)*