

## Dickcissel *Spiza americana*



**Folk Name:** Judas Bird, Black-throated Bunting

**Status:** Sporadic Breeder and Winter Visitor

**Abundance:** Rare

**Habitat:** Open grassy fields for breeding and hedgerows and thickets in winter

Artist and ornithologist Roger Tory Peterson described the male Dickcissel as looking like a “miniature meadowlark” due to his 6-¼-inch size, bright yellow breast, and black throat patch. This colorful bird is common to the tallgrass prairies of our Midwestern states. In the Carolinas, it is a scarce and sporadic breeding bird found in grasslands and fallow fields. In this region, breeding colonies are not persistent. These local populations seem to come and go, often quickly, as field habitat undergoes agricultural or successional changes.

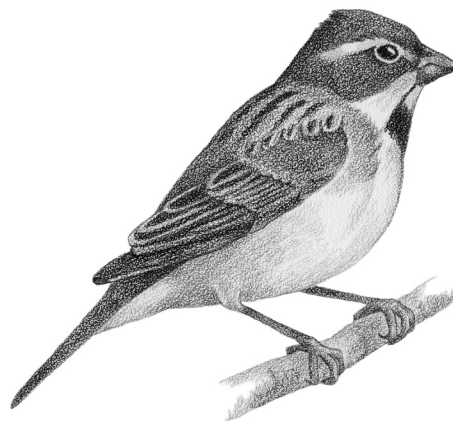
It is believed that during the nineteenth century the Dickcissel was a more common breeding bird along the Atlantic Seaboard, but for reasons that remain unclear, it became a sparse and sporadic breeder by the beginning of the twentieth century. In 1885, Leverett Loomis described it as a “common summer resident” found in Chester County “in certain partially cleared grain fields.” In 1891, he found it entirely absent from the area and wrote: “It is remarkable that it should come so abruptly, be common for two seasons, and then utterly abandon the locality.”

In 1910, South Carolina ornithologist Arthur T. Wayne wrote:

Although this species is now considered by almost all ornithologists to be extinct within the past thirty years, throughout the whole extent of the Atlantic coastal plain, this impression is not well-founded, at least as far as the states of Georgia and South Carolina are concerned, for the Black-throated Bunting or “Judas-bird” breeds at Augusta, Georgia, as well as in Aiken and Fairfield counties South Carolina.

Wayne noted that one observer at Winnsboro in Fairfield County reported it “nests in natural meadows on our creeks.” Despite years of field work in the Coastal Plain, Wayne himself found only two Dickcissels in the state between 1883 and 1910.

The Dickcissel had not been officially confirmed in the state of North Carolina at the time of the publication of the first edition of *Birds of North Carolina* in 1919. The first were confirmed in Raleigh on May 19, 1928. However, the second edition, published in 1942, designated the bird as “formerly summer resident, now very rare.” The authors wrote: “The Dickcissel or Black-throated Bunting, is



a prairie bird which in the days of the early American ornithologists, was of frequent occurrence on the Atlantic Coast, but later it abandoned the region almost entirely. In 1928, they appeared to attempt to regain their old territory and were seen in numerous places in the east.” This included Raleigh and Hendersonville.

In 1935, a male Dickcissel “in rather dull plumage” found in Summerville, SC, made national ornithological news as the first Dickcissel ever found during the winter season in the United States. This bird showed up at a feeder in the yard of W.B. Gadsden on 20 January, and it remained there until 10 April, during which time its plumage had “brightened considerably.”

By 1960, the Dickcissel had been found sporadically in North Carolina at Morganton, Lenoir, Charlotte, Winston-Salem, Greensboro, Wilmington, and Raleigh. Several individuals had been found during the winter. In 1964, a detailed study was made of three pairs nesting in Raleigh. By 1980, small breeding colonies described as “local and erratic” were known in several areas of the North Carolina Piedmont and individuals were sporadically encountered on the coast.

In South Carolina, colonies were located in 1928, 1929, 1935, and 1940. Alexander Sprunt reported finding one Dickcissel in the town of York on July 13, 1944. Five birds were found in Spartanburg in late May 1956, but no nest was found. By 1970, South Carolina ornithologist Milby Burton reported: “On the basis of the many records the Dickcissel can now be regarded as a rare though sporadic visitor in the central and upper part of the State, having been seen mostly during the summer but occasionally in winter.” This remains the status of this bird throughout the Carolina Piedmont as we know it today.

Reports of the Dickcissel in the Central Carolinas in the twentieth century are shared below.

Joe Norwood wrote this account:

On Jan. 15, 1956, I noted the occurrence of a male Dickcissel at the feeder of the Shuford Peelers in southeastern Charlotte. Additional occurrences have since been noted in the neighborhood and it now seems apparent that this bird passed the major portion of the winter here. It is with us now. On Mar. 16, Mrs. Norwood spotted a male Dickcissel feeding with House Sparrows in our yard. She was able to observe the bird for some little time with 7 x 35 binoculars—at times as close as 10 feet. The bird seemed to have a wart-like growth on one foot that might have bothered him since he occasionally drew that foot up into his feathers. Mrs. Richard Cochran, who lives one block from our home, reports that a male Dickcissel has been an almost daily visitor at her backyard feeder since last January. Presumably this is the same bird we have been seeing. It was usually seen in mid-morning and sometimes late in the afternoon. It was always on the ground, most often feeding in company with other birds. On Sunday afternoon, Apr. 1st, Mrs. Cochran saw the Dickcissel exhibit a very aggressive attitude toward the other feeding birds. On six different occasions he singled out and chased away a House Sparrow. The Dickcissel did not remain at Mrs. Cochran's feeder after Apr. 1. However, Mrs. Lester Carleton, across the street from the Cochrans, saw him and heard him singing on Apr. 5, in the late afternoon.

A male was present 5 January through 6 April in 1958 at a feeder station on the back porch of the home of Morton L. Church in Charlotte. It was described as



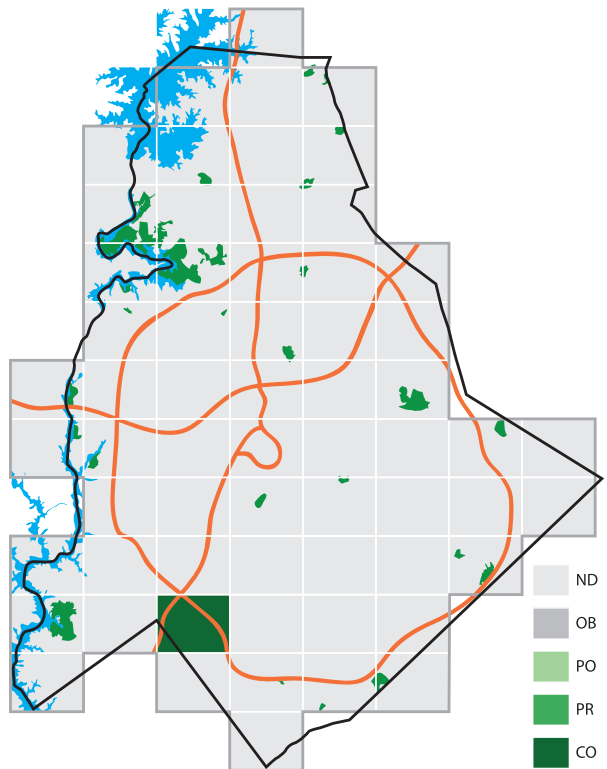
*Dickcissel in Pineville in May 2011. (Jeff Lemons)*

having “fairly bright plumage, [and] the black V at the breast was particularly conspicuous against the yellow. The eye stripe was clearly defined but rather dull.” The bird ate grain with Purple Finches, Pine Siskins, and White-throated Sparrows.

Mrs. E.J. Presser provided this account:

On January 16, 1959, I saw on the gravel of my drive in my yard in Charlotte, NC, a bird whose sleek appearance and behavior—unlike the House Sparrow—caused me to take a close look with my binoculars. It was associated with House Sparrows, Doves, and Starlings. I saw the yellow on the throat, the stripe over the eye and the chestnut at the bend of the wing and knew it to be a female Dickcissel. I watched it at several other locations in the yard of the 16th, but did not see it again after that date. On February 4, however, I saw a male Dickcissel in the maple tree opposite my window and had a good look at him before he flew away.

Doug Pratt found a Dickcissel in Mecklenburg County on May 6, 1961. H. Lee Jones sighted two Dickcissels near Charlotte on September 29, 1962. Nina and Malcom Chandler located a pair of Dickcissels on the Stanly Spring Bird Count held on April 29, 1972. This was reported as only the second record of the Dickcissel in Stanly County. Then, a third was reported in the county later that year



### Mecklenburg County Breeding Bird Atlas:

Very Local (PR/0, CO/1)

on December 21, 1972. Dick Brown recorded individual Dickcissels visiting bird feeders at more than one Charlotte residence between 20 February and 20 March in 1978.

Paul Hart and David Wright found two to three males on territory near Kings Mountain in May and June 1983, although no conclusive evidence of breeding was seen. Hart found them at the same location again three years later. Bill Hilton Jr. reported one near York on November 24, 1984. Taylor Piephoff found a small group of three male and three female Dickcissels breeding in northern York County on June 28, 1988. He was able to locate a nest with three eggs. On October 29, 1989, David Wright watched a Dickcissel at the Ervin Cook Farm near the Town of Huntersville and then saw one at the same spot on October 6, 1992.

Allen Bryan found four or five breeding pairs near Lattimore in Cleveland County in June 1990, and Simon Thompson found a singing male near Reepsville on June 21, 1990, in Lincoln County. Thompson found singing males at two sites in western Gaston County, not far from Waco, on June 14, 1991. Males were seen there again in 1993, 1994, and 1995. One bird was reported in York County on May 13, 1996, and in Cleveland County on

May 17, 1996. Dickcissels were sighted in Gaston County on May 1, 1997, in Chester County on 10 May and 3 June, 1997, and in Cleveland County on May 24, 1997. Three males and a female were spotted near Lattimore in Cleveland County on May 20, 1998. At least four singing males were found in Cleveland County in June 2000.

Since the turn of the twenty-first century, there have been annual reports of Dickcissels scattered throughout the Central Carolinas. Reports have come from Alexander, Cabarrus, Catawba, Cherokee, Chesterfield, Cleveland, Gaston, Iredell, Mecklenburg, Stanly, and Union counties.

The breeding population of the Dickcissel in North Carolina is currently listed as “Significantly Rare,” meaning it exists in small numbers and needs monitoring.

Mecklenburg County Breeding Bird Atlas volunteer John Scavetto discovered the first nesting evidence of the Dickcissel ever in Mecklenburg County in spring 2011 off Miller Road in the Town of Pineville. This field was situated on the Mecklenburg–York county line. A pair was later observed mating here but no nest was discovered. Unfortunately, the site was later lost to development.