

Lawrence Hall of Science, Local Nature Stories, July 9, 2010, From Green to Gold:

An Early Summer Surprise

The first week of June, two regular walkers along the Ridge Trail above Claremont Canyon, made an exciting discovery. John Colbert and Erica Rutherford tell the story in an email: “We had just finished talking about not having seen a Lazuli Bunting lately when Erica followed an unusual song—and there was the Indigo Bunting.” (Though common in Eastern and Southern U.S., the Indigo Bunting is rare in the West).



Indigo Bunting photo by Pat Bacchetti.

John continues: "The female, in typical bunting fashion, stayed quite hidden—popping up briefly to follow the male, and then dropping down into the tall grass and shrubs. I think the likelihood of the female being a Laz (Lazuli) Bunting is greater than its being an Indigo. The chance of both a male and a female Indigo being in the same area at the same time and finding each other and going through courtship, etc. is vanishingly small!"

Most birdwatchers being “twitchers” at heart (the British word for those who pursue rare birds), many of our clan ascended the steep road up Panoramic Hill over the next few days. Most of us were lucky enough to get at least a glimpse, and a few had time to take photos. The male was often seen singing from the top of a small wind-pruned bay or from a similar-sized live oak nearby. The song is sweet, tinkling, and each note is repeated twice.

Indigo Bunting or not, the Ridge Trail that runs along the saddle between Strawberry Canyon and next door Claremont Canyon is an exciting piece of landscape—perhaps one of the wildest places in the East Bay. The hills drop away beneath you in a vertiginous swoop. The south-facing slope supports a fine assemblage of ‘soft’ chaparral plants which often grow on the steeper slopes near the coast. They include certain sages, sticky monkey, and coyote brush, all knit together to provide inviolate habitat for rabbits, Wrentits, and California Thrashers.

You expect to see Lazuli Buntings in grassy, shrubby areas in the hills this time of year. They can often be heard singing their sweet bunting song on the slope across from LHS below the Space Sciences Building. But the Indigo is another story, rarely seen in these parts. In the mid-west where their ranges often overlap, they commonly hybridize which explains why the bunting accompanying the Indigo may well have been a Lazuli.

The blue of both birds is glorious—lapis lazuli, indeed, with the blue brightened by a touch of turquoise. Of course, there is no such thing a member of the bird kingdom with blue-pigmented feathers. They're black ("blackbird of happiness" doesn't sound quite right). It's all a matter of reflection. Light striking the smooth, black feathers of the buntings is partly absorbed and partly reflected. The reflected part is seen by our eyes as blue and the message is sent for confirmation on to our brain.

Some birds—think of the throats of certain hummingbirds—have grooved feathers. The light is reflected in a different way and what we see is described as iridescence.

Finding a rare bird is a special event, one sure to lift you out of the summer doldrums, while keeping alive the possibility of unexpected gifts.

Note: News about the Indigo Bunting was passed on by Kay Loughman, an expert birder and photographer who lives in Claremont Canyon. She is documenting the natural history of our sister canyon. Check out the website: "Wildlife in the North Hills" www.nhwildlife.net.

--Phila Rogers