

Managing Private and Public Open Lands

Public and private land managers can provide habitat by maintaining some grasses and shrubby growth, such as those species seen among inland dunes and forests next to salt marshes.

Open-canopied forests can support successful painted bunting reproduction if ground cover is greater than 50% grasses mixed with large numbers of shrubs 3 to 18 feet high. Open canopied trees should provide no

more than 75% cover. Under ideal conditions, a breeding painted bunting population of 100 to 200 pairs needs 1,200 to 2,500 acres.

In Short:

- Conserve old growth maritime forests and shrubby grasslands with scattered trees such as found between the beach dunes closest to the ocean and those dunes located farther back from the ocean.
- Do not use prescribed burning in beach dune habitats. Salt spray, drought and storms will keep habitat in early, open and shrubby successional stages. Also, protect the habitat from accidental forest fires.
- Manage pine-oak forests for saw timber with basal area of 50 square feet per acre. Ground cover should be scattered scrubs 3 to 18 feet high with many open areas covered by

grass. Use prescribed burning every four to five years to create mixed patches of shrub and grass cover.

- Painted buntings, especially juveniles, find freshwater wetlands important as feeding areas. Try to restore or preserve these emergent freshwater wetlands in areas within one kilometer of breeding habitat.
- Other habitats such as mowed dikes and shrubby or open forest habitat can be important for painted buntings if freshwater emergent wetlands or salt marshes are adjacent or less than 1/2 mile away.

Conclusion

Humans do not have to cut themselves off from beaches and barrier islands to help painted buntings. With a degree of consideration and planning, this little songbird considered by so many to be “without equal” may survive quite well with its new neighbors on Georgia’s coast.

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More information on painted buntings can be found at:
<http://georgiawildlife.dnr.state.ga.us>
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*A bird without equal—
will it survive?*

**Yes! We can
make a difference.**



Ty Ivey

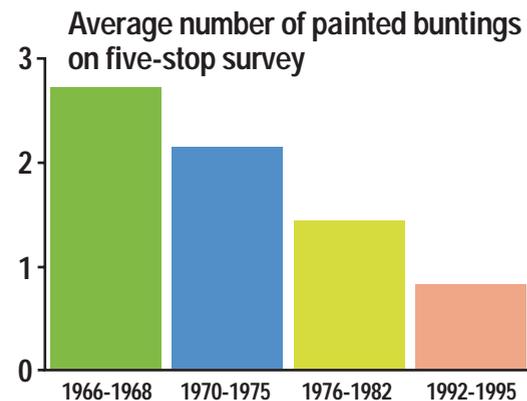
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Open pine forest habitat with shrubs and grasses should be maintained with prescribed fire at least every six years.

Georgia's coastal residents may feel surprised, thrilled and even fortunate when streaks of red, blue and green flash through their backyards. These distinctive displays in flight belong to a prized, little songbird called the **painted bunting**. Homeowners and birders describe spotting its colorful plumage as awesome, dazzling and an unforgettable experience.

Unfortunately, such encounters may end as the painted bunting or *Passerina ciris* continues to decline in numbers. From North Carolina to Georgia, painted buntings living along the Atlantic coast have declined in population by three percent each year since the late 1960's. That's a decline of 50% in less than 20 years.



But with help from homeowners and land managers, the little bird described as *nonpareil* or "without equal," may yet return to its dazzling glory.

Basically, painted buntings need a little more understanding from human neighbors who are developing and building on Georgia's barrier islands and beaches.

Breeding Habits

Painted buntings are seed eating Neotropical migrants. During spring and summer, the coast from North Carolina to Georgia rings with difficult to hear, but musical, finch-like songs. Males in vivid plumage mark territories with these bursts of song, while less



An aerial view of optimum nesting habitat for painted buntings along the Atlantic shoreline of Sapelo Island, Georgia

colorful females tend nests filled with three to four glossy white eggs covered in fine red spots.

Together, one male and female pair can raise two, and sometimes three, clutches of eggs in one season. By summer's end, a dozen or more offspring may join parents to fly south to winter in Cuba, south Florida or the Bahamas.

A second population exists in the Midwest and possibly in Mexico, but the coastal group rarely intermixes with them and both populations appear to be in serious trouble.

Suspected causes affecting the birds include deteriorating habitat, a condition causing increased predation of parents and offspring, and habitat losses for nesting.

Habitat Degradation

Painted buntings prefer the shrubby forests found on Georgia's barrier islands and coastal mainland. This mixture of thick vegetation and open grassy areas provides ideal protected cover for nests. Convenient, nearby food sources allow the nesting buntings to forage open areas, searching the grasses, ground and shrubs for insects and seeds.

Unfortunately, human development and land management practices have and continue to alter potential bunting nest sites. Stands of shrubby wax myrtle and buckthorn near open-canopied pines and hardwoods are increasingly limited on Georgia's coast. Replacing native grasses and seeds with sod grass also denies buntings important food sources.

Increased Predation and Thievery

As shrubs, ground cover and adjacent forest disappear, buntings may relocate to thinner, less desirable habitat, providing fewer hiding places to avoid predation from rodents, owls, hawks, and climbing snakes.

Two more recently arrived parasitic species, the brown-headed cowbird and its Caribbean cousin, the shiny cowbird have added to the painted bunting's troubles. If allowed, female cowbirds replace momentarily unattended eggs with their own eggs and then fly off to never return.

Unsuspecting songbirds—including painted buntings—return to hatch and feed cowbird chicks, reducing the numbers of their own species to reach adulthood. Research shows that this is not a common problem in *good habitat* in southeastern Atlantic coastal states.

Among scattered trees and shrubby vegetation, less than 8% of bunting nests, or one in 25, may be affected by cowbird parasitism and even fewer cowbirds survive—less than one cowbird in 36 painted bunting nests.



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Top to bottom: female and male painted buntings

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Ideal shrub and grassland habitat for nesting painted Buntings on Sapelo Island's Nanny Goat Beach. Only a few trees are found in this habitat.

Can Something Be Done?

Research shows that appropriately managing and preserving habitat—shrubs, beach dunes and the forested edges of salt marsh—does mean higher survival rates for painted buntings. In short, better habitat equals

better hiding places from prowling predators.

This means even developed or landscaped areas can be important sources of food for nearby painted bunting nest sites. When planning for landscapes, do the following:

- Try to retain or preserve freshwater wetlands. Emergent wetlands combined with shrub or open-forest like settings are important habitat for painted buntings.
- Maintain shrub cover and native grasses in your landscaping plans. Some exotic grasses with large seeds such as bahia can be used by painted buntings.
- Try not to mow natural grass areas more than once per year, preferably in mid-March. Grassland protects important food sources.
- Maintain medium to large trees, which are important for singing perches. One to two are needed for every two to three acres (3/4 to 1 1/4 hectares).