

First Illinois Nesting Record for Painted Bunting (*Passerina ciris*)

by Dan Kassebaum

On Saturday, 29 July 2000, Keith McMullen, Frank Bennett, and I discovered a male Painted Bunting (*Passerina ciris*) along Front Street in East St. Louis, Illinois.

As the week progressed, several visiting birders questioned why anyone would go birding in such a place — this is an old warehouse district and a rather uninviting place to go. However, in 1994 Keith discovered a small breeding population of Western Kingbirds here, and so we make an annual trip to find the kingbirds perched along the utility lines of Front Street. In preparation for our July 2000 big day, I scouted Front Street looking for Western Kingbirds. This area is also very good for nesting Bell's Vireo, Blue Grosbeak and Orchard Oriole. I quickly located all four species including 13 Western Kingbirds.

In spite of the tremendous thunderstorms Thursday night and Friday, 27 and 28 July, we began our big day at midnight in Harrisburg. We spent the morning traveling through southern Illinois eventually heading north to Carlyle Lake for shorebirds. We planned on getting to East St. Louis by dusk. When we arrived, we quickly located the kingbirds and then scanned the bridges for a Peregrine Falcon, when a small brightly colored bird landed on the wire directly in front of us.

Within seconds, we realized it was an adult male Painted Bunting. Fortunately both Frank and I had cam-

eras. We spent from 7:30 to 7:45 p.m. getting plenty of pictures and video. Frank also recorded the bird's song with his video camera, and we used Keith's cellular phone to alert the local hotline

While I was on the phone, Keith noticed what he thought might be a female Painted Bunting. I reported it as such, but at the time, we had no idea we were parked right next to the nest. We were anxious to continue our big day, so we left.

The following morning, Sunday, 30 July, I returned to East St. Louis where Frank Holmes had already located the male Painted Bunting. Within an hour, Albert Seppi arrived and by then, we too saw a female-type bunting flying back and forth to a thicket of small elm trees along the side of the road. We agreed the female was exhibiting nesting behavior. We tried to peer into the thicket from a safe distance, but couldn't see where the female was landing.

Nesting Behavior

While observing the birds that morning, we noticed the male sang from a utility pole or wire when the female was at the nest. When the female left the nest, the male would follow her into the thicket of mulberry, sumac, cottonwood, and elm where both remained out of sight for up to 10 minutes. As the pair returned to the nest area, they chipped loudly to one another. The male returned to his perch and sang as if to direct attention to himself. Then the female slipped in toward the nest.

Recognizing the pattern, we realized we could get close enough to the nest to get a picture while the parents were away feeding. At first, Al and I could not locate the nest, but we could clearly hear the begging calls of the young birds. After a second look, we realized the nest had fallen to the ground; one bird was trapped under the nest, and another was exposed, emaciated, and near death. We heard a third young calling from within the tangle at the base of the nest tree. As I photographed the nest and young, the female returned with an insect and fed the third nestling. Satisfied, we backed away.

Soon afterwards many local birders arrived eager to see the male, but also agreeing to keep a safe distance from the nest. As the day progressed, we wondered what to do about the birds on the ground. After much debating, I decided to return to the nest. The emaciated



Painted Bunting Nest. Photo: Dan Kassebaum, East St. Louis, IL, July 2000.