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The News-Press

Wild file: Lazuli bunting

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• Scientific name: *Passerina amoena*

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• Details: This bunting, of late, has behaved like a wayward runaway (or at least one member of its species has done so, apparently), arriving suddenly on Pearl Street in Alva about 1,000 miles east of its traditional, easternmost territory earlier this month, according to a number of bird-watchers who traveled there to see it.

"Today I traveled to the home of Lois and Leon White, in Alva, Lee County, hoping to see the lazuli bunting that has been coming to their feeders," wrote Brian Ripoza, who posted his adventure on-line.

"Several birders were already there when I arrived just before 8 a.m. ... The lazuli finally returned about 9:45 a.m. and stayed for several minutes; at one point it was joined at the feeder by a male indigo and painted bunting! Large numbers of indigo buntings and American goldfinch were at the feeders virtually the entire time I was there."

A Naples birder who arrived and photographed the lazuli, Vince Lucas, says it is the first of its kind ever seen in Lee County, as far as he knows. Ornithologists say it arrives on the east coast of the state rarely but



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Lazuli bunting

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periodically, and one or two might be spotted elsewhere here on the west coast about every dozen years.

The question is, what is it doing here? Nobody knows the answer, but the likelihood is that this bunting was caught up in a storm or wind that blew it far to the east.

The lazuli bunting resembles the eastern bluebird and to some extent the indigo bunting (with which it can hybridize where the two species cross paths, on the Great Plains), although it's a bit smaller.

You can distinguish this splendid little bird from an indigo bunting by noting the rust-colored band across the top of its otherwise white belly and chest, and the lighter, almost brilliant blue of its head and upper back (that's in the male), along with the white wing bars.

The female shows a complex and subtle weave of mostly brown and gray. But like the male, she has the two white wing bars, which help distinguish this bunting from all other buntings in North America.

Lazuli buntings breed in the west, or at least west of the 100th meridian, extending from Texas to Canada. Their favored habitats lie in New Mexico, Arizona and California, and south from California well into Mexico.

In spring, the female builds a little nest of grasses, twigs and the like, shaped like a cup, in thick brush or a bushes. Then she lays three or four pale blue eggs, resembling a robin's.

When young birds set out on their own, the male takes about two years to be ready to mate. Although year-old males arrive in a breeding ground (in bushy country in the west) without a song, the 2-year-olds create their own songs, based on the combinations of other males' songs, or on the syllables of one particular older male. Each song is unique to each bird.

Like other buntings, the lazuli eats insects and seeds.

• Sources: www.birds.cornell.edu; www.surfbirds.com; www.birdwatchersdigest.com; www.birdonthe.net; www.tropicalaudubon.org; www.secondchancebirds.net; www.enature.com

— Roger Williams, special to news-press.com

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