

Spiza americana (Dickcissel)

Family: Cardinalidae (Saltators and Ant-tanagers)

Order: Passeriformes (Perching Birds)

Class: Aves (Birds)



Fig. 1. Dickcissel, *Spiza Americana*.

[<https://nature.mdc.mo.gov/discover-nature/field-guide/dickcissel>, downloaded 13 March 2017]

TRAITS. *Spiza americana* is one of the most common birds in the grasslands of North America. The typical weight of adults is usually 29g and length is 15cm, with females usually 10-20% smaller than the males. It is a small bird that has a short, wide, piercing beak. The male has a grey head with yellow stripes above its eye and a white chin with yellow stripes on either sides of its beak. There is a black “V” under the chin of the males, white throat stripes along it and the chest is bright yellow leading down to the whitish-greyish belly. Their shoulders also have a distinctive chestnut brown patch (Fig. 1). The females’ features are not as distinct as the males’ as they do not possess the black “V”, their chest is a duller yellow, the throat stripes are less noticeable and the chestnut colour on the shoulders are also more muted (Fig. 2). Juvenile dickcissels look similar to the mature female, their colours however are not as bright. The male sings a “dick, dick, cissel” song, and both sexes makes a “bzrrrt” song as their flight call (Temple, 2002).

DISTRIBUTION. Dickcissels are considered partially nomadic birds as their movement ranges from North America to parts of South America, including the Caribbean and Central America. During the breeding periods, they live in the central-eastern states of the U.S. while in their non-breeding periods they reside in Central and South America and Trinidad and Tobago (Ridgely and Tudor, 1989) (Fig. 3). The largest populations of *Spiza americana* in the winter/non-breeding periods however exists in the fields of the llanos region of Venezuela (Temple, 2002).

HABITAT AND ACTIVITY. Breeding and non-breeding habitats are usually similar. The dickcissel makes its home in grasslands which may include pastures, hayfields, agricultural land and prairies. The grass is usually tall and contains a large amount of forbs (Temple, 2002). The breeding season starts in April-May (Terres, 1980) and the birds' mating grounds are the central and eastern states of the U.S. including Montana, Texas, Alabama and South Carolina. They start moving south around September-October (Hilty and Brown, 1986) when the mating season ends. Their passage is through Central America and the Caribbean and they usually reside in the northern states of South America like Venezuela, Columbia, northern Brazil and Trinidad and Tobago (Ridgely and Tudor, 1989). In Venezuela *Spiza americana* is considered a pest as it feeds on agricultural crops in the fields that they occupy for the winter (Basili and Temple, 1999).

FOOD AND FEEDING. Young ones are usually fed insects, and mature birds look for seeds on the ground. Their diet consists mainly of small insects and spiders along with seeds and grains (Terres, 1980).

POPULATION ECOLOGY. During the non-breeding season, dickcissels gather in large groups and rest together in these groups. These groups consist of numbers ranging from hundreds to thousands in the north (Hilty and Brown, 1986) to around 3 million where they reside in Venezuela (Basil and Temple, 1999) in the winter.

REPRODUCTION. *Spiza americana* are polygynous birds, a male mating with several females (Verner and Wilson, 1966). This practice of polygyny is advantageous to males in that they acquire more offspring and more territory, and to females because this might be the only way that she may be able to breed with the most suitable male (Harmeson, 1974). The most common breeding grounds are prairies with tall grass. The nest is built by the female and it is open cup-shaped (Temple, 2002) within the tall grass. The average size of the clutch is 3-6 blue eggs (Fig. 4) which the female incubates for 12-13 days. She lays one egg a day until her clutch is completed and may replace it if the first is lost, they usually have two broods a year (Temple, 2002).

BEHAVIOUR. After hatching, young dickcissel chicks, or fledglings as they are called, stay in the nest for about 8-10 days. The fledglings are fed by females only (Temple, 2002) and they continue to do so for about four weeks subsequent to the departure of the nest by the fledglings (Berkley, 2004). *Spiza americana* resides near to ground, sometimes even making their nests on the ground. This makes it more accessible for them to feed as most of their food is already on the ground. They migrate south for the winter and when doing so they usually fly in large flocks (Fig. 5), this may be hundreds of birds at once. Once at their destination after migration they sometimes reside in large flocks, with numbers reaching more than a million birds (The Nature Conservancy, 2017).

APPLIED ECOLOGY. *Spiza americana* is considered Least Concern as the population is listed as stable (IUCN, 2016). The only major threat to the dickcissel is humans. This is in Venezuela where they are considered a pest and a threat to agricultural lands as they consume the produce. They are sometimes poisoned and when they are, this could cause a significant decrease in the population as they are in extremely large flocks there (IUCN, 2016).

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Fig. 2. Female dickcissel (*Spiza americana*).

[<http://www.backyardbirdcam.com/gallery/dickcissel-f.htm>, downloaded 13 March 2017]

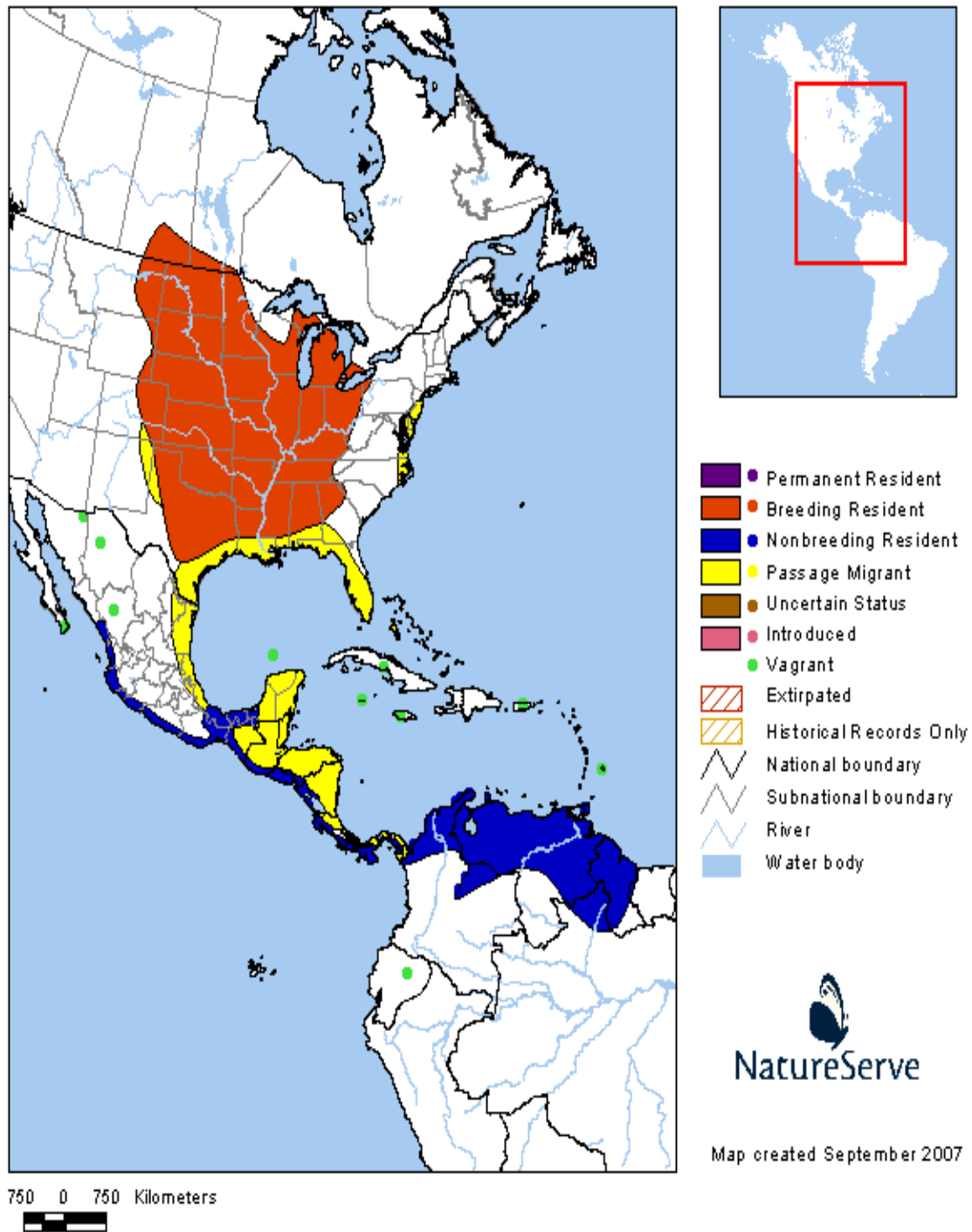


Fig. 3. Distribution of *Spiza americana*.

[<http://explorer.natureserve.org/servlet/NatureServe?searchName=Spiza%20americana>, downloaded 13 March 2017]



Fig. 4. Clutch of dickcissel eggs.

[<http://www.birdfellow.com/birds/dickcissel-spiza-americana/photos/identification>, downloaded 13 March 2017]



Fig. 5. A flock of *Spiza americana* in flight.

[<http://www.arkive.org/dickcissel/spiza-americana/image-G130337.html>, downloaded 13 March 2017]