

- [Atlantic](#)

Top News

Rare bird appears in Cape Breton

[Andrew Rankin](#) (arankin@herald.ca)

Published: May 23, 2018 at 11:50 p.m.

Updated: May 24, 2018 at 8 a.m.



David Johnston discovered this painted bunting in Marble Mountain on Tuesday. The tropical bird, also named Nonpareil for its supposedly unrivalled beauty, was first sighted in Nova Scotia in the mid-1960s and has only been spotted about 60 times since.

- Submitted

Creature known for multi-coloured plumage seen at Marble Mountain bird feeder

MARBLE MOUNTAIN, N.S. — David Johnston had to see the painted bunting, widely considered the most beautiful bird in North America, for himself.

With camera in tow, the birder of 50 years wasted no time hopping in his car and hightailing it 40 kilometres away to Cape Breton's Marble Mountain to see the tiny rainbow-coloured creature.

There it was, as promised, hanging out at a friend's bird feeder. The trek from his Port Hawkesbury home on Tuesday had paid off.

"Just beautiful," said Johnston. "First one I've seen. A lifer for me."

RARE SIGHTING

It was a rare sighting, indeed.

The tropical bird, also named Nonpareil for their supposedly unrivalled beauty, was first sighted in Nova Scotia in the mid-1960s and has only been spotted about 60 times since, said Ian McLaren, an emeritus professor of biology at Dalhousie University and a Nova Scotia Bird Society board member.

A few of them are occasionally flung to our shores while en route to their breeding grounds in the southeastern United States.

"They set out from the tropics, subtropics, sometimes across the Gulf, and keep on going beyond their summer range," said McLaren. "Often they get driven off the southeastern Atlantic coast and caught up by the frequent southwesterly airflow that brings us windy and often wet weather here in spring."

ANOTHER RARE BIRD SIGHTING

A few days before Johnston's sighting, another full-plumaged male was recorded on the Northumberland coast, said McLaren.

The painted bunting has only been spotted in Nova Scotia four times in the last decade, according to eBird, a website that tracks bird sightings worldwide.

It's sightings like these that continue to motivate Johnston — a retired engineer at the town's pulp and paper mill.

The week before, he'd spotted a leucistic American robin, an uncommon bird defined by its whitish plumage, also in Marble Mountain. Johnston has become the local go-to-guy on birds and contributed to the most recently published Maritime Breeding Bird Atlas.

He said some of the species that have dwindled in Nova Scotia over the past two decades include the olive-sided flycatcher, rusty blackbird and Canada warbler. Others, such as the mourning dove, crows and bald eagles, are on the rise.

“People ask me all the time what birds I find most notable, but to me they all are,” said Johnston. “It’s just natural for me to want to get out in the wilderness and see what’s out there.”