A Glimpse into an Oldtime Fiddler's Repertoire

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1 Introduction

Oldtime music is rooted in the interaction of diverse communities which continually formed US culture. Oldtime music is commonly associated with the Southeastern Appalachian fiddle and banjo dance-traditions. Fiddlers usually are the community event facilitators providing music for dances. Solo pieces and songs are also common. Oldtime music varies by time, and place on a community level, even if an individual performs alone. The term popularity stems from the urban, folk-revivalist Mike Seeger, who was influenced by the 1920s commercial recording industry's re-branding of the term [1]. In the global information age, I think a broader scope of the term is best.

I am an oldtime fiddler, who specializes in Virginia tunes based on my repertoire in Figures 5. I starting learning oldtime fiddle from Mark Campbell at age 16 or 17 around 2011-2012. Mark learned how to fiddle from Armin Barnett, who learned from Franklin George. Like Mark, I collect and listen to source recordings of "oldtimers" to learn their repertoire and style. Many of these oldtimers were born around the turn of the 20$^{\text{th}}$ century. My goal is to play their repertoire, and musical styles because I like the way it sounds. I do not attempt to imitate the source recordings exactly, but I attempt to meticulously optimize the highest level of musicality constrained by their style. For some artists with high musicianship, minimal interpolation is performed, but for others with lower musicianship, more interpolation is performed. I accept my own contributions and experiences while I interact with the old to produce sonic output.

Most of the information in this inquiry comes from my identity as an oldtime fiddler in the Mid-Atlantic states. Consequently, many of my claims reflect this identity, and my background of studying ethnomusicology in university. This dual etic and emic approach has bias from self-reporting data and also identifying as a Virginia fiddler. This study is an exploratory data analysis of my repertoire of oldtime fiddle tunes. This data is from an active spreadsheet of fiddle tunes, tunings, sources, and other attributes that has been maintained since around 2017.

2   Methods

Since 2017, I compiled a spreadsheet of active fiddle tunes in my repertoire. It includes columns such as Tune Title, Source of Tune, Key, Tuning Notes, and Crooked [-/+] status for individual tunes. As of the publication of this inquiry, there are 433 tunes in my repertoire included in this spreadsheet.

I attempt to play tunes daily, which becomes a meditative ritual when returning from work. Often, I consult the tune spreadsheet and sort the tunes by their key or tuning for sequential practice in that particular key or tuning. In this process, my memory, retention, and musicality are exercised for each piece. A portion, or an entire tune are often forgotten if they were infrequently practiced. Sometimes listening to the source recording helps recall a tune. A tune will be dropped from the spreadsheet and repertoire if it is not memorable enough and I don't want to re-learn it. Repertoire expansion and contraction processes often involves a trade-off between learning new tunes, and retaining infrequently played tunes.

Positive feedback loops occur for the tunes I practice more frequently, and conversely the tunes that are practiced infrequently. Tunes that are infrequently played are often the main driving influence if they are removed from the spreadsheet. For new tunes, there is a period of time before they become part of repertoire and added (or conversely not removed) from the spreadsheet. Time is also spent listening to source recordings to learn new tunes, and to refresh memory and musicality

of prior tunes. Multiple sources for tunes are ordered in the Source of Tune column with the first position assuming more guiding influence on the overall version of a tune.

The following tables, and figures were created using my repertoire spreadsheet. R-studio scripts were created to automate data interpretation. Fiddlers are geographically distributed at the county level, for their state and binned into the count of tunes my repertoire attributes to them. The bins of tune counts are as follows: 1, 2-5, 6-10, 11-14, and 15+. These bins were selected based off the total tune count distribution.

Geographic spread of the tunes were created based on the primary source listed in the Source of the Tune column, at the county of residence during the creation of the source recording. For many oldtime fiddlers this is the county where they lived for the rest of their life, and for other fiddlers this is the community where they happened to reside when they were recorded.

One example of this assumption is with Armin Barnett. Armin now resides in Washington state, but at the time of recording (in 1973) he had lived at least three years of residence in Albemarle County, Virginia during graduate school. Armin met and taught my fiddling mentor Mark Campbell at university. He was influential on Mark and imparted many of Mark's fiddling sensibilities. Another example is John Johnson who was recorded in his home county in Braxton County, West Virginia by Louis Watson Chappell in 1947. John traveled and spent many years in Texas, which influenced his bowing, repertoire, and style. While he returned to his home county to record, he is reflective of the time, place, and experience from his musical consumption.

Geographic county-level data does not entirely represent the interwoven interactions of people. Nor does not encapsulate radio, commercial recording, influences which have global reach. In contrast to this set-back, these global influences are simply ingrained (to whatever degree) in the artist living in their community (at the county-level) at that point in time of the source recordings.

3 Results

A chi squared independence test was conducted for the categorical states and their total counts of fiddle tunes. The assumption of independence was met as different, distinct versions of the same fiddle tune, are independently counted in that particular state's tune count. This means that there could be numerous versions across state boundaries in my repertoire without affecting one state's count of the same tune. The matrix size assumption was met by removing states with less than 5 counts. This left only Virginia, North Carolina, West Virginia, Kentucky, Tennessee and Georgia in the test.

Test	Chi-Squared	df	p-value
χ^2	164.24	5	$2.2e^{-16}$

Table 1: The Chi-squared independence test results of the top six states (VA, NC, WV, KY, TN, GA).

The p-value from the chi-squared test in Table 1 is statistically significant at the 5% level, which suggests that each state's fiddle tune counts are on independent chi-squared distributions. Given these results, and how Virginia tunes nearly double the following state in Figure 1 I can statistically assert that I am a Virginia fiddler based on repertoire.

Tuning or scordatura, is an important aspect to mid-Atlantic oldtime traditions. I engage in the practice of re-tuning based on individual tunes. Most of my repertoire is in standard tuning (GDAE), high-bass (ADAE), or high-bass and counter (aka cross) (AEAE) tuning as observed in Figure 3. The latter two tunings are almost exclusive to a particular key. Other tunings besides these main three have lower amounts of tunes attributed to them, and often include solo pieces. Besides tuning and key categorization, tunes are categorized as modal in oldtime music. Modal suggests ambiguous tonality. Figure 3 also showcases the amount of modal and minor tunes for each tuning. Most of my repertoire has modal and minor tunes in standard tuning (GDAE), followed by high-bass and counter (aka cross) (AEAE), and then high-bass (ADAE) tuning.

Crooked tunes are another category in oldtime repertoire where certain tune parts are in different time signatures. In oldtime music, crooked tunes are distinguished by "adding" a beat, or
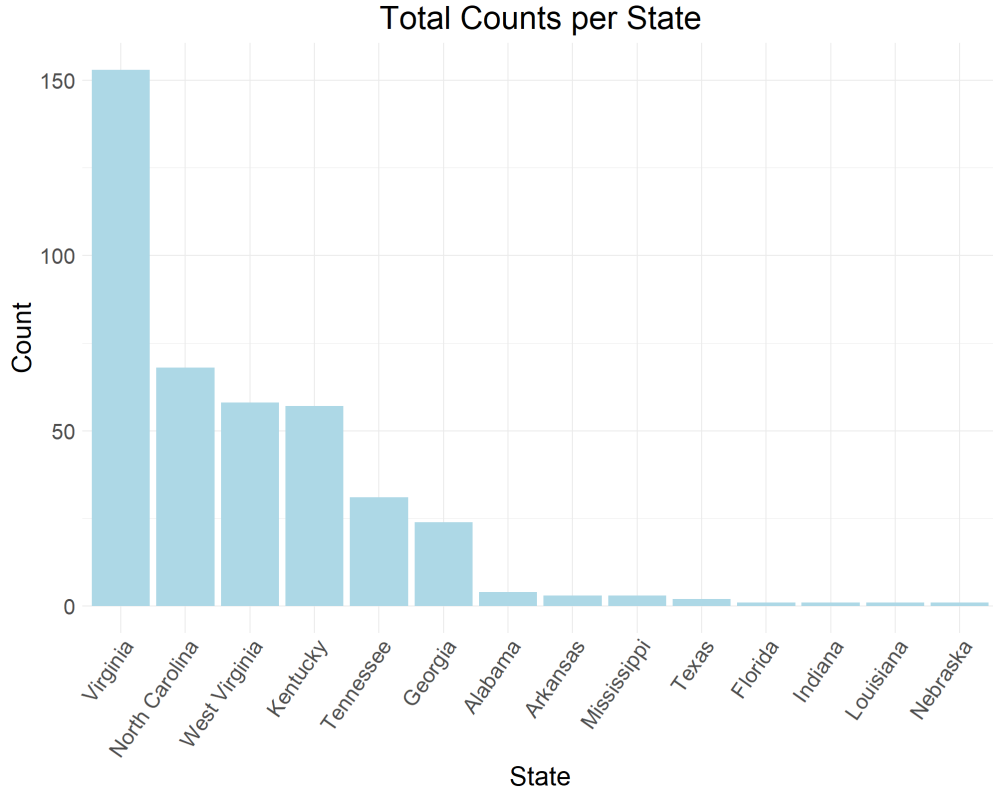
Figure 1: Total counts of fiddle tunes attributed to each state.

more rarely "subtracting" a beat. In either scenario, crooked tunes could be defined by the sum of beats through one iteration of the piece. Modulo operations of this sum by an even integer divisor less than nine but greater than zero represents the division of beats in a measure. Equation 1 showcases this formula with remainders as the leftover, crooked beats.

$$\sum_{i=0}^{1} (Beats_i) \mathbin{\%} 2n \quad \text{for } n \in \mathbb{Z}, \text{in } (1 \le n \le 4) \tag{1}$$

The bottom plot of Figure 3 showcases tuning and occurrence of crooked tunes with the most varied counts occurring in standard (GDAE) tuning, followed by high-bass and counter (AEAE) tuning.

The top five artists in Table 2 are Ed Haley, Marcus Martin, Emmett Lundy, Norman Edmonds, and Clayton McMichen. This is not entirely surprising since my mentor, Mark attributes many tunes to these same artists in his repertoire. Artists 6-10 are solely attributed to either Virginia or West Virginia. Below are maps of individual states with binned dots for each artist. Most of the counts occur in the Appalachian region as shown in Figure 4.
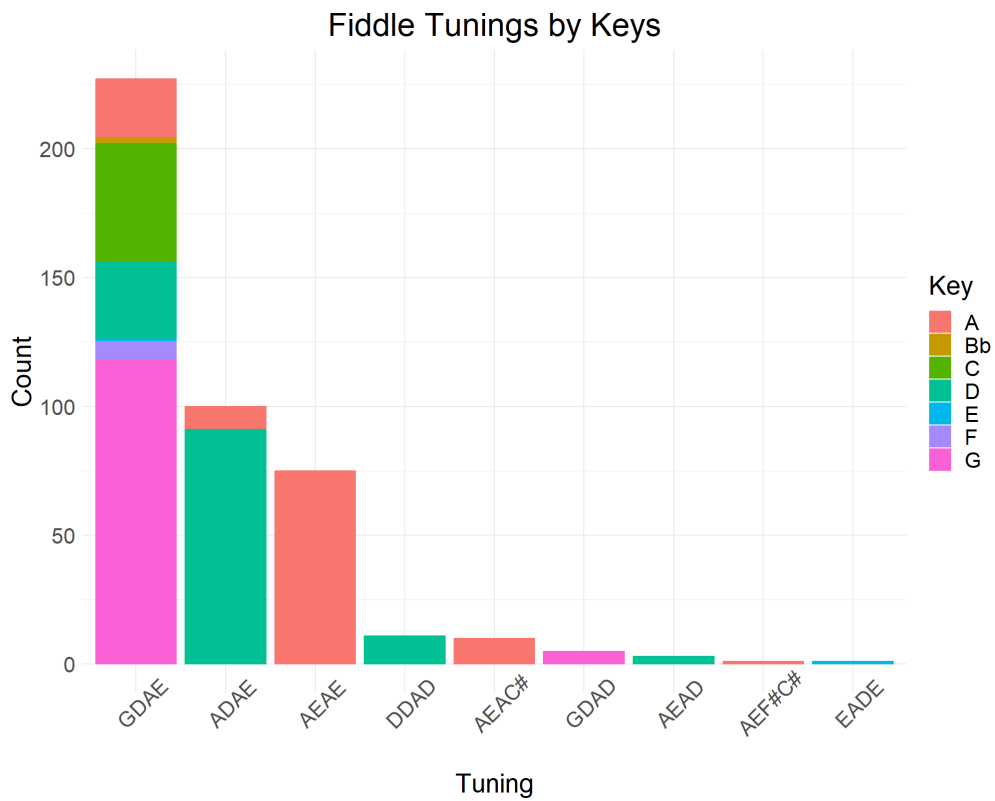
Figure 2: The distribution of keys by fiddle tuning with key changes included as the initial key.
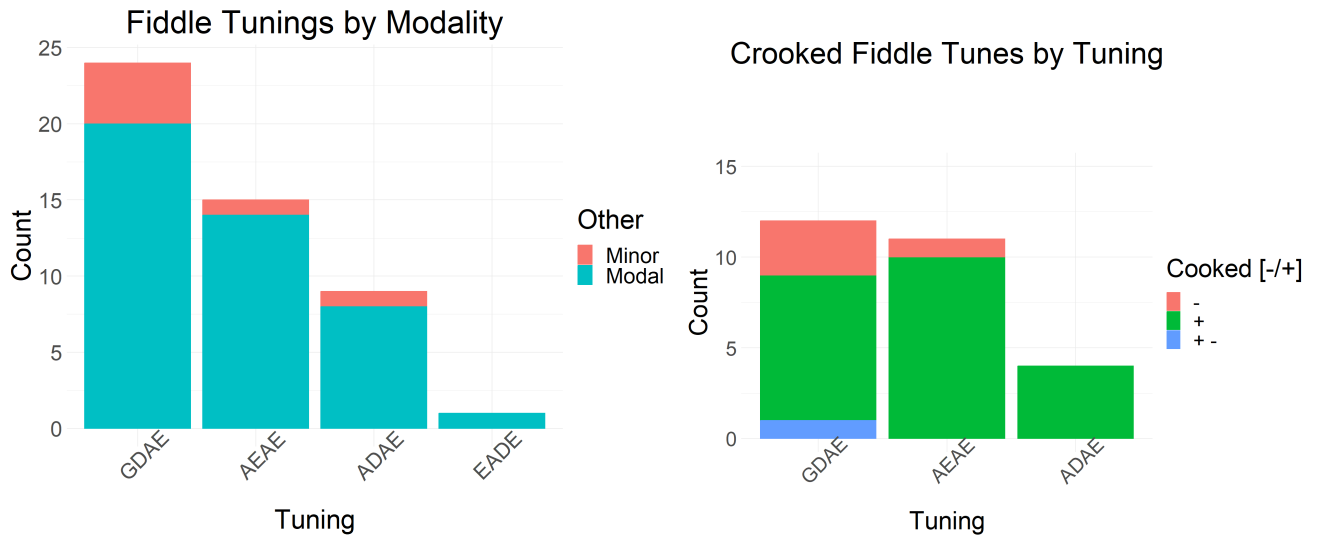

Figure 3: The left plot shows the distribution of modal and minor tunes by tuning. The right plot shows the distribution of crooked tunes by tuning. The minus sign (-) signifies subtracting a beat, and the plus sign (+) signifies adding a beat. Both signs (+-) indicate both subtraction and addition.

Rank	Name	Count	County	State	Rank	Name	Count	County	State
1	Ed Haley	23	Rowan	Kentucky	56	Pug Allen	2	Augusta	Virginia
2	Marcus Martin	23	Buncombe	North Carolina	57	Sam Conner	2	Floyd	Virginia
3	Emmett Lundy	21	Grayson	Virginia	58	Stuart Lundy	2	Grayson	Virginia
4	Norman Edmonds	19	Carroll	Virginia	59	Alva Green	1	Elliott	Kentucky
5	Clayton McMichen	15	Fulton	Georgia	60	Andrew Baxter	1	Gordon	Georgia
6	Mark Campbell	14	Chesterfield	Virginia	61	Bill Helms	1	Upson	Georgia
7	Cowan Powers	13	Scott	Virginia	62	Bill Hensley	1	Madison	North Carolina
8	Melvin Wine	13	Braxton	West Virginia	63	Blaine Smith	1	Hamilton	Tennessee
9	Edden Hammons	12	Pocahontas	West Virginia	64	Bob Walters	1	Burt	Nebraska
10	French Carpenter	12	Clay	West Virginia	65	Bruce Greene	1	Yancey	North Carolina
11	Burl Hammons	11	Pocahontas	West Virginia	66	Charlie Osborne	1	Russell	Virginia
12	J.W. Day	11	Rowan	Kentucky	67	Clarence Cobb	1	Hopkins	Kentucky
13	Manco Sneed	11	Cherokee	North Carolina	68	Cush Holden	1	Levy	Florida
14	Henry Reed	10	Giles	Virginia	69	Cyrus Futrell	1	Cross	Arkansas
15	Tommy Jarrell	10	Surry	North Carolina	70	Dewey Hamrick	1	Clay	West Virginia
16	John Ashby	8	Fauquier	Virginia	71	Dudley Vance	1	Washington	Tennessee
17	N.H. Mills	8	Franklin	Virginia	72	Earl Johnson	1	Gwinnett	Georgia
18	Taylor Kimble	8	Carroll	Virginia	73	Ed Morrison	1	Boyd	Kentucky
19	Eck Dunford	7	Carroll	Virginia	74	Ed Taylor	1	Dickenson	Virginia
20	W.H. Stepp	6	Magoffin	Kentucky	75	Emory Mills	1	Whitley	Kentucky
21	Fulton Myers	5	Carroll	Virginia	76	Ernie Carpenter	1	Braxton	West Virginia
22	G.B. Grayson	5	Johnson	Tennessee	77	Esker Hutchins	1	Surry	North Carolina
23	Ben Jarrell	4	Surry	North Carolina	78	Glen Smith	1	Carroll	Virginia
24	Bill Shelor	4	Patrick	Virginia	79	Grey Craig	1	Henry	Virginia
25	Charlie Stripling	4	Kennedy	Alabama	80	Guy Brooks	1	Alleghany	North Carolina
26	J.W. "Babe" Spangler	4	Patrick	Virginia	81	Harold Hausenfluck	1	Chesterfield	Virginia
27	John Dykes	4	Scott	Virginia	82	Hick Edmonds	1	Smyth	Virginia
28	John Salyer	4	Magoffin	Kentucky	83	Hiter Colvin	1	Lincoln	Louisiana
29	Leonard Rutherford	4	Wanye	Kentucky	84	Issac "Ike" Reaves	1	White	Arkansas
30	Luther Strong	4	Perry	Kentucky	85	Ivan Weddle	1	Floyd	Virginia
31	Posey Rorer	4	Rockingham	North Carolina	86	J.E. Mainer	1	Cabarrus	North Carolina
32	Chalie Bowman	3	Washington	Tennessee	87	Jack Pierce	1	Smyth	Virginia
33	Allen Sisson	3	Fannin	Georgia	88	James Brown	1	Muehlenburg	Kentucky
34	Armin Barnett	3	Charlottesville	Virginia	89	James Chisholm	1	Albermarle	Virginia
35	Bunt Stephens	3	Moore	Tennessee	90	James McCarroll	1	Roane	Tennessee
36	Charlie Higgins	3	Grayson	Virginia	91	Jesse Shelor	1	Patrick	Virginia
37	Clyde Davenport	3	Wanye	Kentucky	92	Jim Booker	1	Jessamine	Kentucky
38	Dr. D.D. Hollis	3	Lamar	Alabama	93	Jimmy Driftwood	1	Washington	Arkansas
39	Emory Bailey	3	Calhoun	West Virginia	94	John Johnson	1	Braxton	West Virginia
40	Ernest Stanley	3	Carroll	Virginia	95	John Lewis	1	Stokes	North Carolina
41	Floyd Ethridge	3	Rutherford	Tennessee	96	John Summers	1	Howard	Indiana
42	Frank Weems	3	Perry	Tennessee	97	Lonnie Corsbie	1	Guliford	North Carolina
43	J.D. Harris	3	Buncombe	North Carolina	98	Lowe Stokes	1	Fulton	Georgia
44	Oscar Stone	3	Sumner	Tennessee	99	Mose Coffman	1	Greenbrier	West Virginia
45	Osey Helton	3	Buncombe	North Carolina	100	Oscar Harper	1	Terrell	Texas
46	Sid Harkreader	3	Wilson	Tennessee	101	Oscar Wright	1	Mercer	West Virginia
47	Ambrose Stuart	2	Hamblen	Tennessee	102	Owen "Snake" Chapman	1	Pike	Kentucky
48	Frank "Dad" Williams	2	Avery	North Carolina	103	Roy "Speedy" Tolliver	1	Arlington	Virginia
49	Estill Bingham	2	Bell	Kentucky	104	Sam McNeils	1	Floyd	Virginia
50	Franklin George	2	Mercer	West Virginia	105	Samuel Peacock	1	Navarro	Texas
51	Fred Cockerham	2	Surry	North Carolina	106	Ted Gossett	1	Muhlenberg	Kentucky
52	Howard Wyatt	2	Washington	Virginia	107	Theron Hale	1	Davidson	Tennessee
53	Joe Birchfield	2	Carter	Tennessee	108	William Narmour	1	Carroll	Mississippi
54	John Carson	2	Fulton	Georgia	109	Y.Z. "Wyzee" Hamilton	1	Clay	Alabama
55	John W. "Peg" Hatcher	2	Tishomingo	Mississippi	NA	Various	12	Various	Ireland

Table 2: Artists, tune count, county and state information. Irish tunes, are listed as NA and Various.

4 Conclusion

Repertoire could be analyzed by tuning, key, artist, and county-level geographic information. Most artists are clustered in the Appalachian region often with multiple tune attribution counts. The data shows that I am mainly an oldtime Virginia fiddler by tune repertoire and style. There is bias in self-reporting data, and there is bias in my future repertoire selections. Future time series analysis might be interesting despite this bias. Other research in key and tuning geographic distributions is discouraged since many oldtime fiddlers in this time and place are more similar than different compared to other fiddling traditions. In short, I hope this brief is a start to greater examination of data, and mapping music cultures. Thanks for reading.

References

[1] Seeger, M. (1997). "what is old-time music?" mike seeger, what is old-time music? In *Bluegrass Unlimited.*
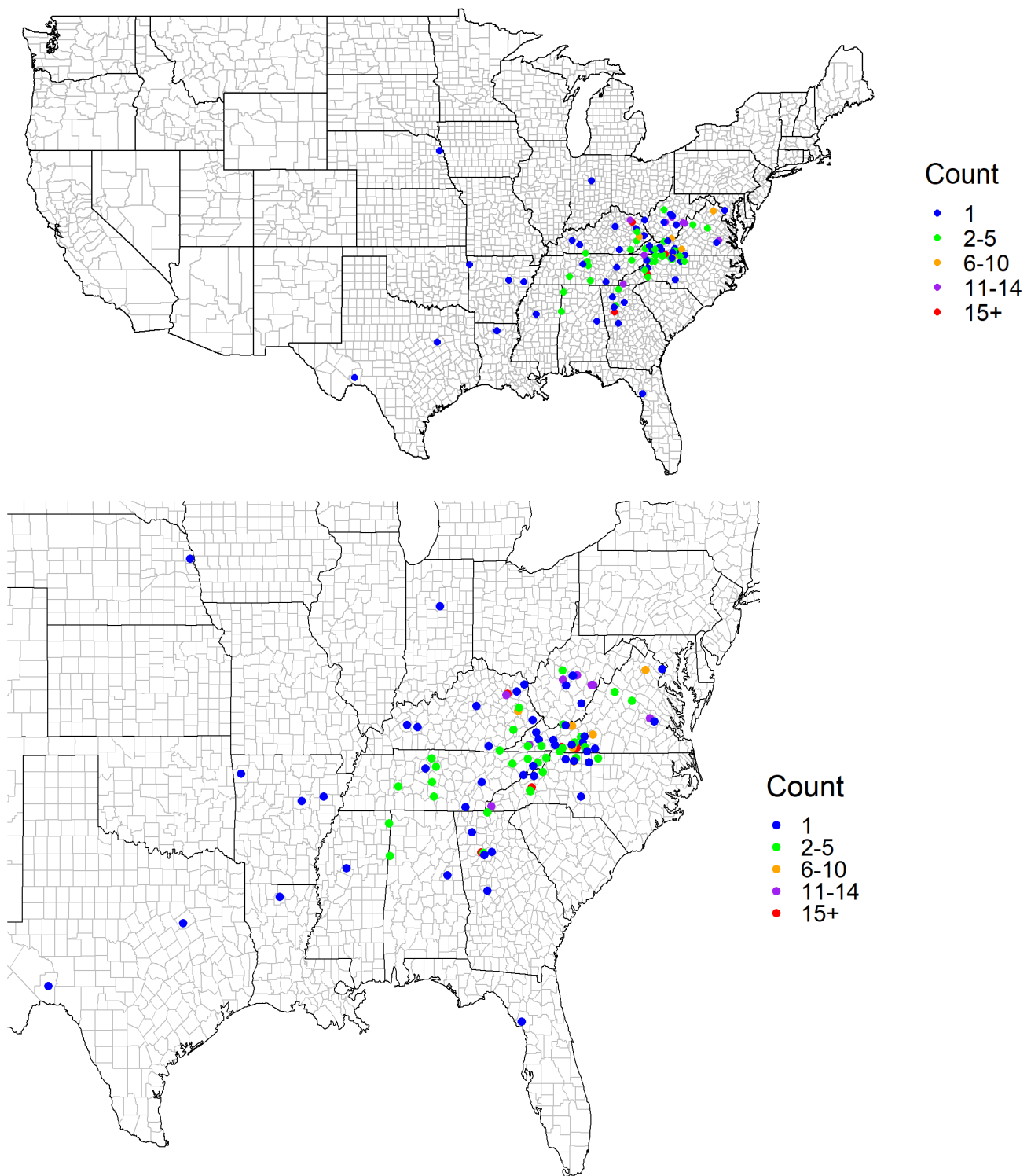
5 Appendix

Figure 4: The top map is of the contiguous United States with the all of the artist counts plotted along the Appalachian region. Below is a regional map to better clearly see the distribution.
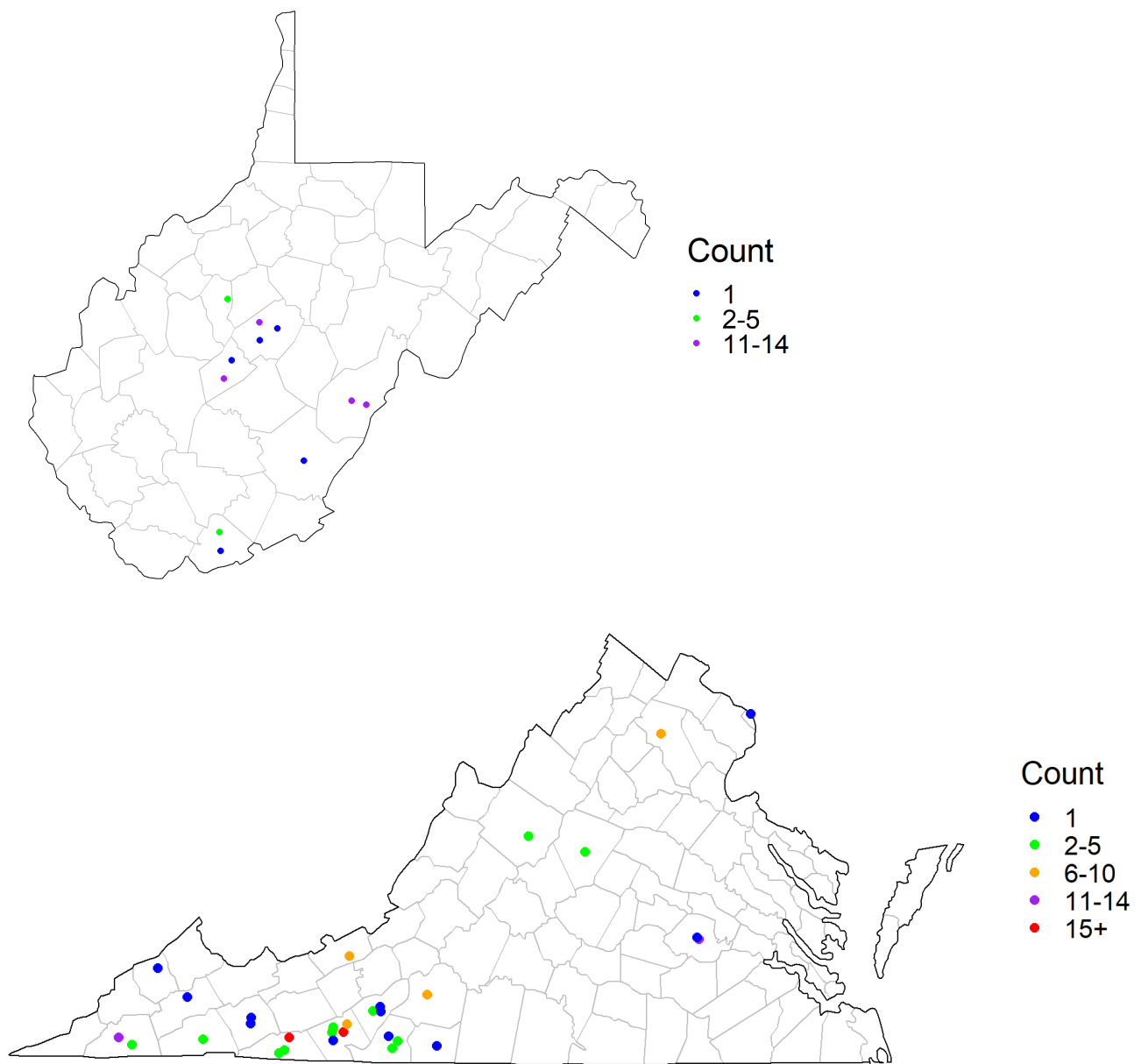
Figure 5: West Virginia, and Virginia artist counts. The red dots corresponding to Emmett Lundy in Grayson county and Norman Edmonds in Carroll county Virginia. The two artists in the city of Richmond, are attributed to Chesterfield county since cities are not included in this study.
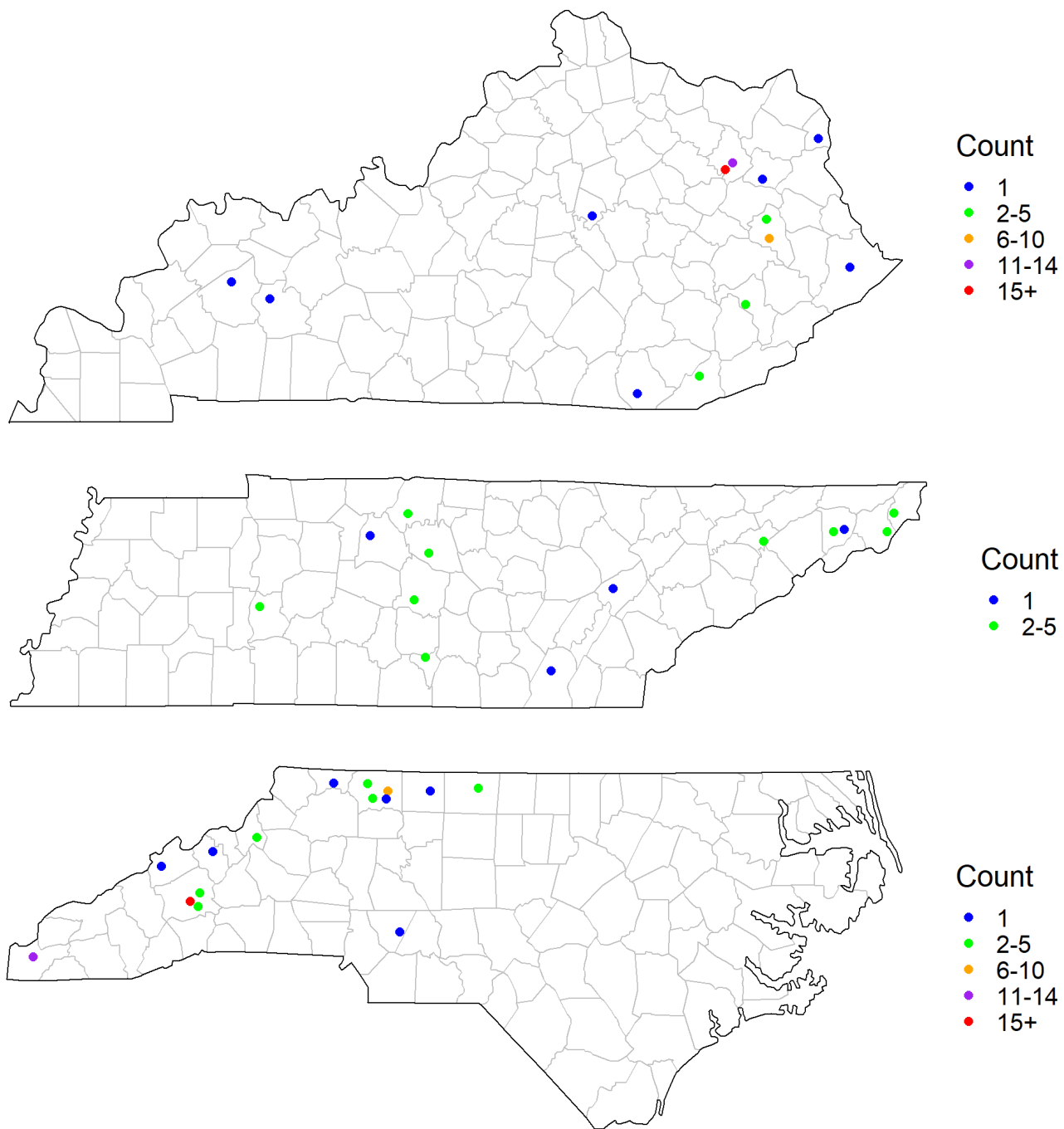
Figure 6: Kentucky, Tennessee, and North Carolina artist counts. The red dot in Kentucky corresponds to Ed Haley, and the red dot in North Carolina corresponds to Marcus Martin.
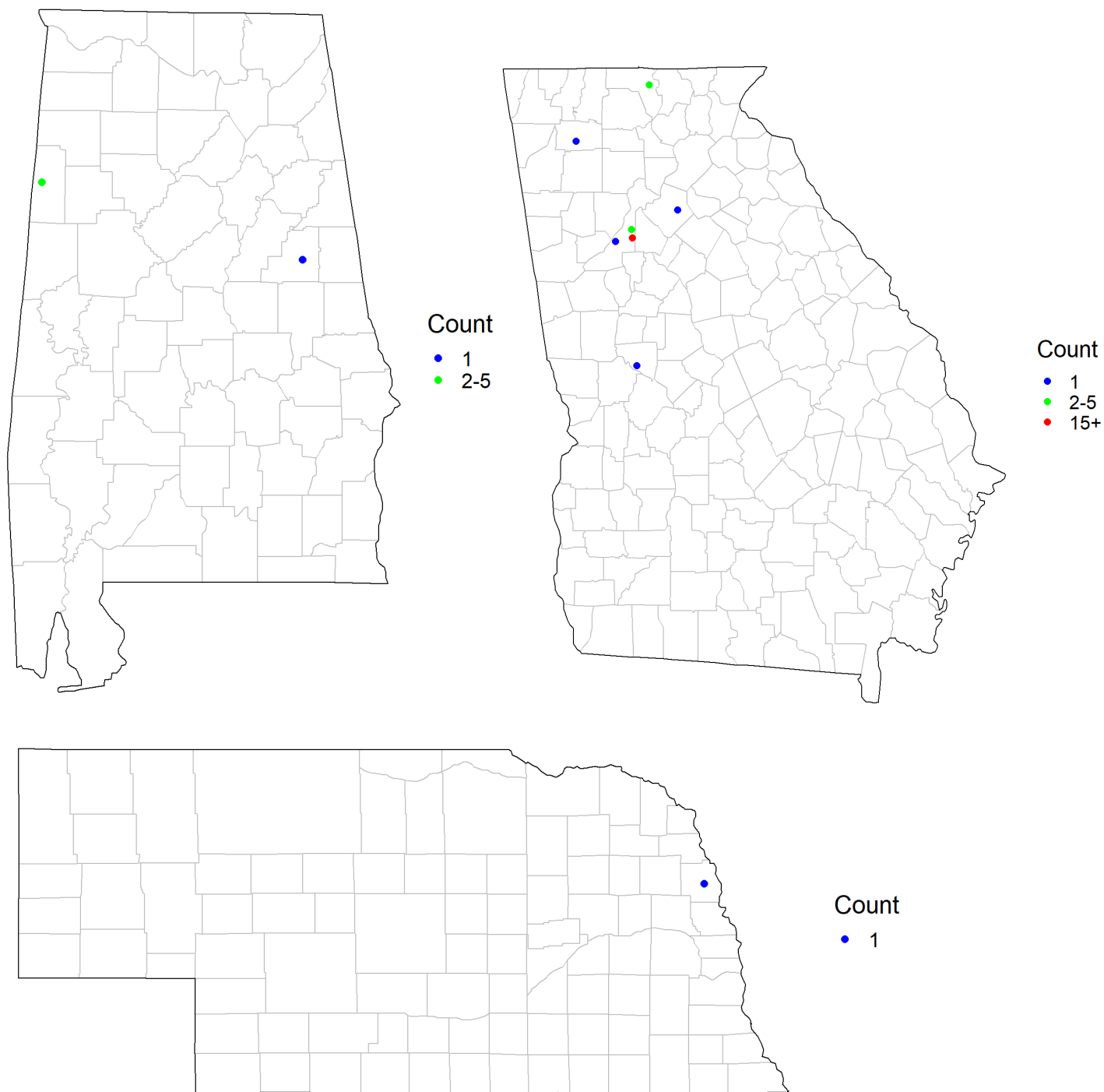
Figure 7: Alabama, Georgia, and Nebraska artist counts. The three artists in the city of Atlanta, are attributed to Fulton County since cities are not included in this study.
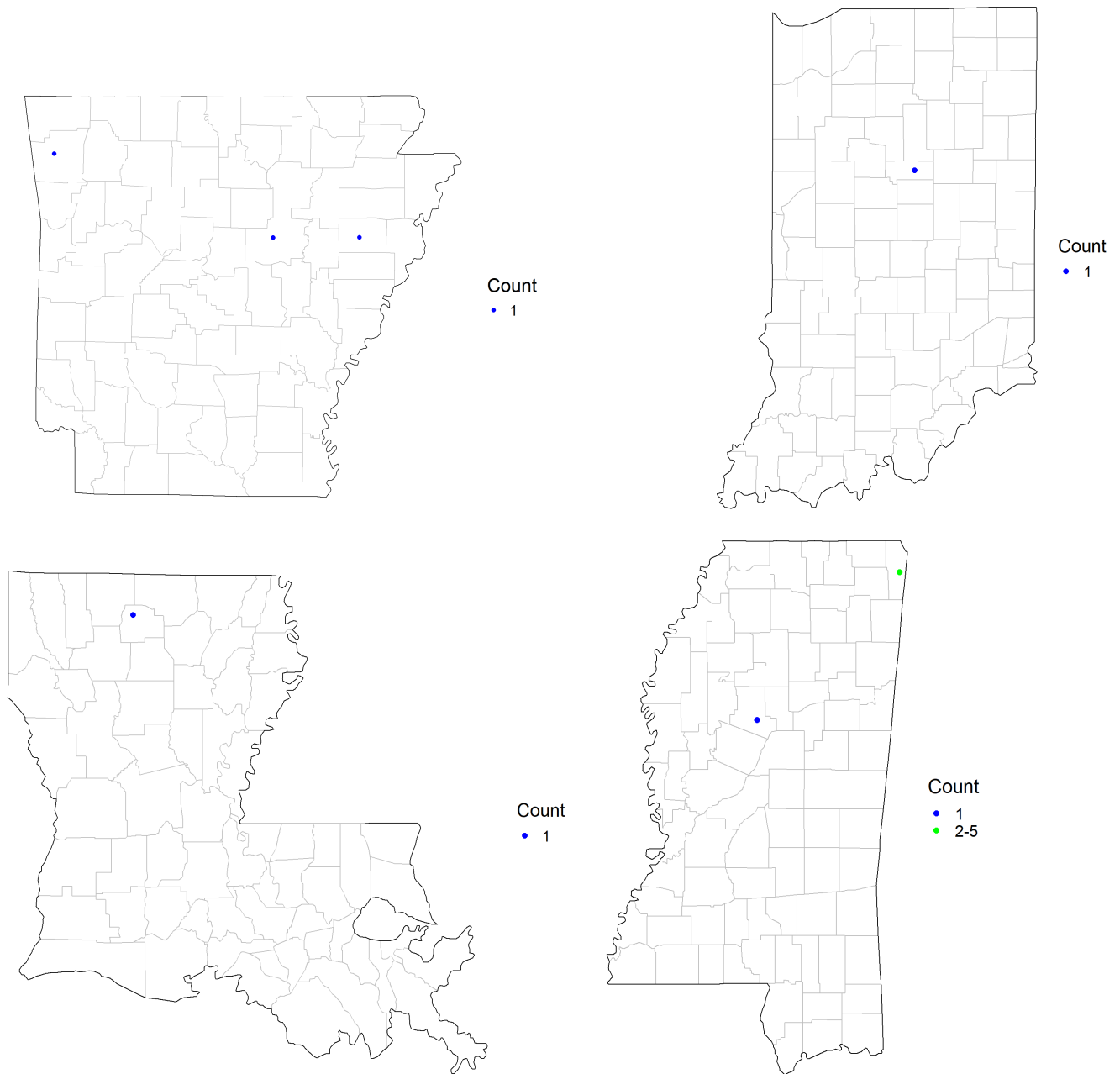
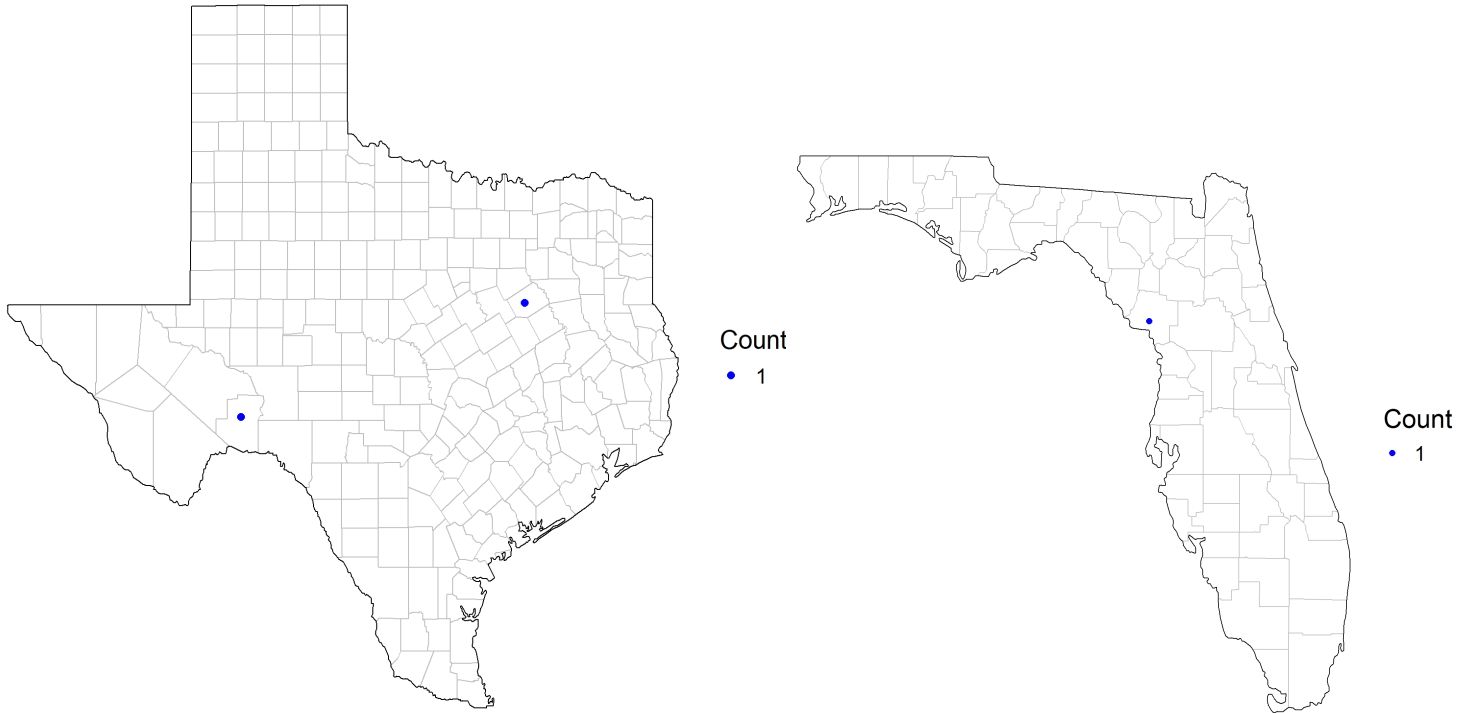**Figure 8:** Arkansas, Indiana, Louisiana, and Mississippi artist counts.

Figure 9: Texas and Florida artist counts.