# A Glimpse into an Oldtime Fiddler's Repertoire

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## 1 Introduction

Oldtime music is rooted in the convergence of diverse communities that have formed US culture throughout it's life. Oldtime music is commonly associated with the Southeastern Appalachian fiddle and banjo dance-traditions. Its meaning varies by time, and place on a community level, even if an indiviual 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. 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 in turn 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 the repertoire, and musical style from these source recordings. I do not attempt to imitate the source recordings exactly, but rather 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. It is an interaction with the old, while accepting my own contributions through sonic output. Additionally these aesthetic goals involve a close study into individual artists and recordings.

Most of the information in this inquiry comes from my participation as an oldtime fiddler and

member within the old time community living in the Mid-Atlantic states. Consequently, many of my claims are reflective of this identity, and as a person who studied ethnomusicology in university. This dual etic and emic approach has bias from self-reporting data and bias in self-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 list 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 Cooked [-/+] status for each individual tune. 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 often becomes a meditative ritual when returning from work. Often, I consult the tune spreadsheet and sort the tunes by their key or tuning, and then practice tunes sequentially for that particular key or tuning. In this process, my memory, retention, and execution of musicality are exercised for each piece. There are often times I forget a portion, or entire tune. This usually happens if a tune is not frequently performed. Sometimes listening to the source recording helps recall the tune. If a tune is not memorable enough, and I don't have a desire to continue to actively learn it, then it will be drop from the list and repertoire. The adding and removal 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 list. For new tunes, there is a period of time before they become part of repertoire and added (or conversely not removed) from the list. Additional time is

spent listening to source recordings when learning new tunes, or for refreshing memory or musicality of prior tunes. Multiple sources for tunes are ordered in the Source of Tune column values with the first source position assuming more direct, and guiding influence on how I play the tune and 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 attributed at the county level, for their state and binned into the count of tunes in my repertoire attributed 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 where they happened to reside when they were recorded.

One example of this assumption is with Armin Barnett, who now resides in Washington state, but at the time of recording (1973) he had lived at least three years of residence in Albemarle County, Virginia when he was in graduate school at the University of Virginia. At UVA, Armin met my fiddling mentor Mark Campbell, and imparted fiddling sensibilities in Mark while teaching him how to play. 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. These are a few examples of how geographic county level data is not entirely representative of the interwoven interactions of people. Nor does not encapsulate radio or commercial recording influences which have global reach. In contrast to this set back of my use of geographical, county-level data, these global influences are simply ingrained ()to whatever degree) in the community 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 versions of the same fiddle tune, even if they are attributed to different states are independent from each other's count. This means that there could be numerous tune 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 |
|------|-------------|-----|---------|
| $\chi^2$ | 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 is statistically significant which suggests that each state's fiddle tune counts are on independent chi-squared distributions as in Table 1. 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.

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 becoming almost exclusive to a particular key. Other tunings besides these main three have low amounts of tunes attributed to them. Besides tuning and key categorization ofttimes tunes are attributed 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 a common sonic practice in oldtime. This involves certain parts of tunes played in different time signatures. In the practice of oldtime music, these crooked tunes are distin-
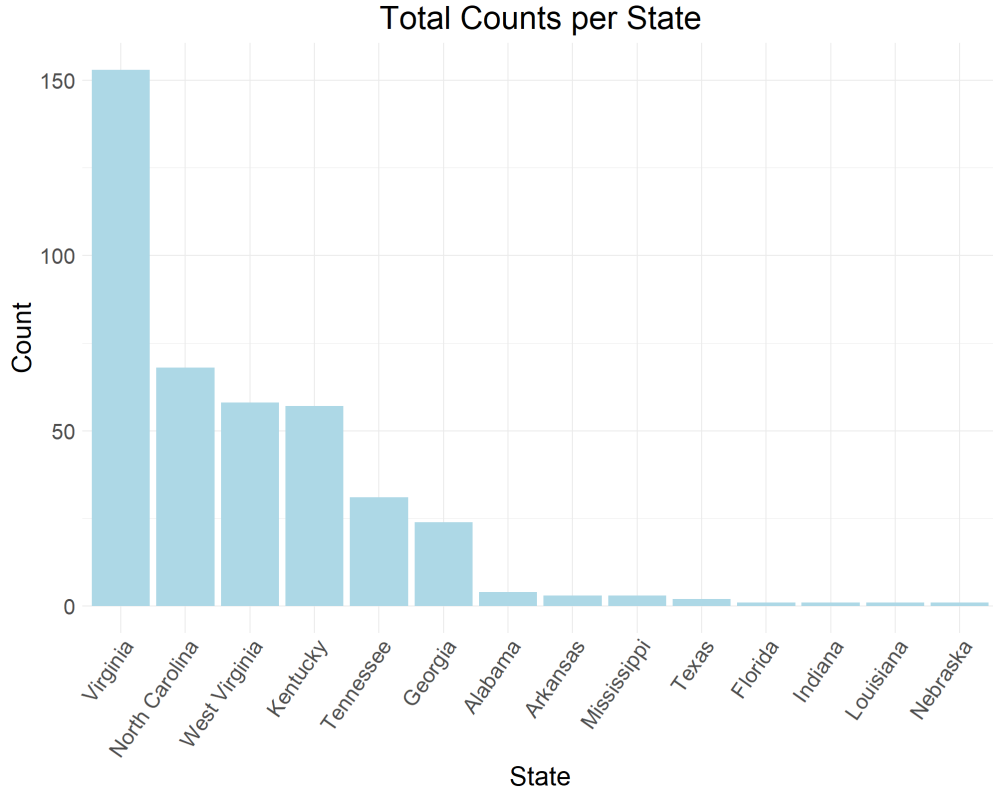
**Figure 1:** Total counts of fiddle tunes attributed to each state.

guished by "adding" a beat, or more rarely "subtracting" a beat. In either scenario, crooked tunes could be defined by the sum of beats through one iteration of the piece using modulo operation. Equation 1 showcases this operation where the beats are summed through one iteration of the tune assuming an even divisor less than nine but greater than zero so the equation remains robust.

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

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. The following five artists 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.
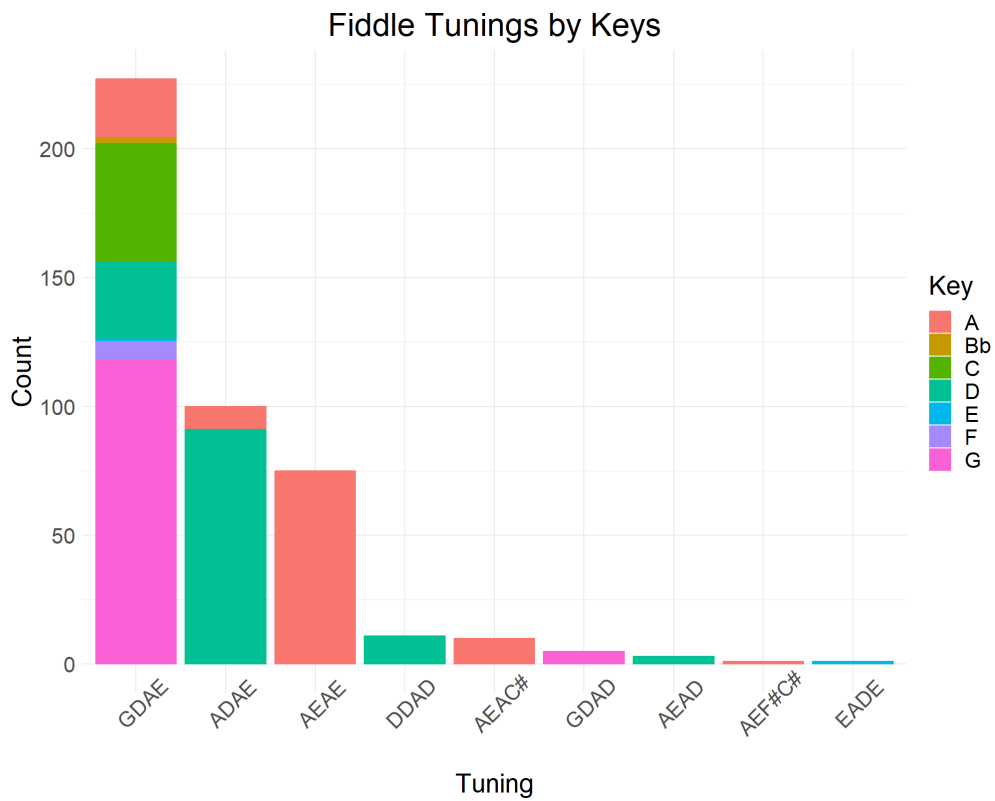
**Figure 2:** The distribution of keys by fiddle tuning with key changes included as the initial key.
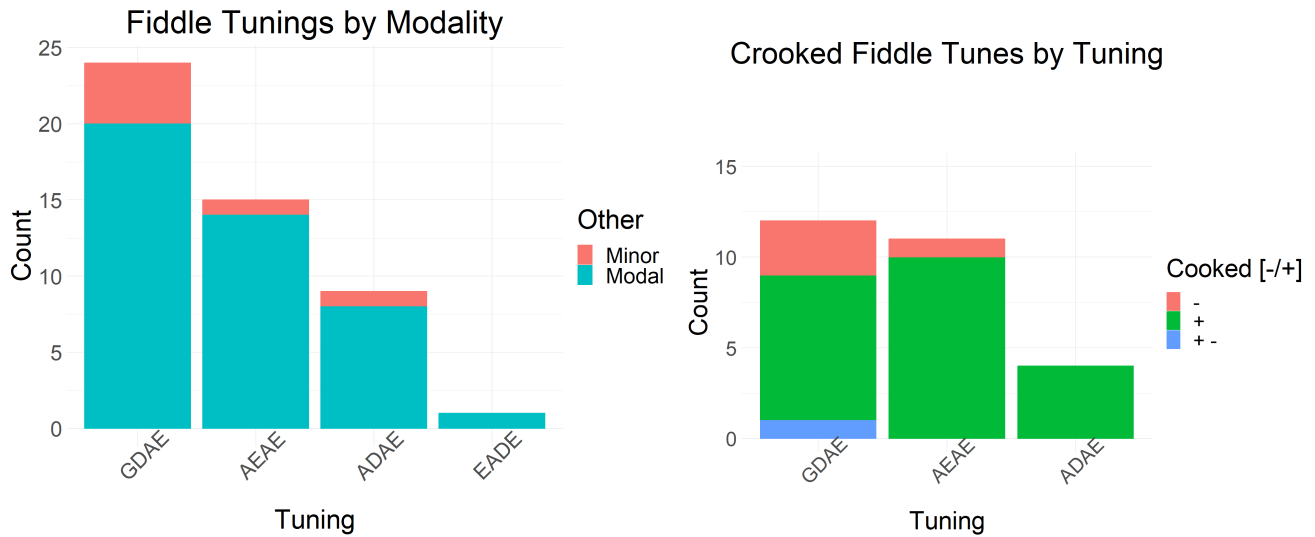


**Figure 3:** The left plot shows the distribution of modal and minor tunes by tuning. The right plot shows the distribution of crooked tunes by tuning. The minus sign (-) signifies subtracting a beat, and the plus sign (+) signifies adding a beat. Both signs (+-) indicate both subtraction and addition.

| 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

Based on the repertoire analysis, most artists are clustered in the Appalachian region often with multiple tune attribution counts. Additionally, I am mainly an oldtime Virginia fiddler. A dual etic and emic approach was conducted to analyze my repertoire by tuning, key, artist, and county-level geographic information. There is bias in self-reported 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.*
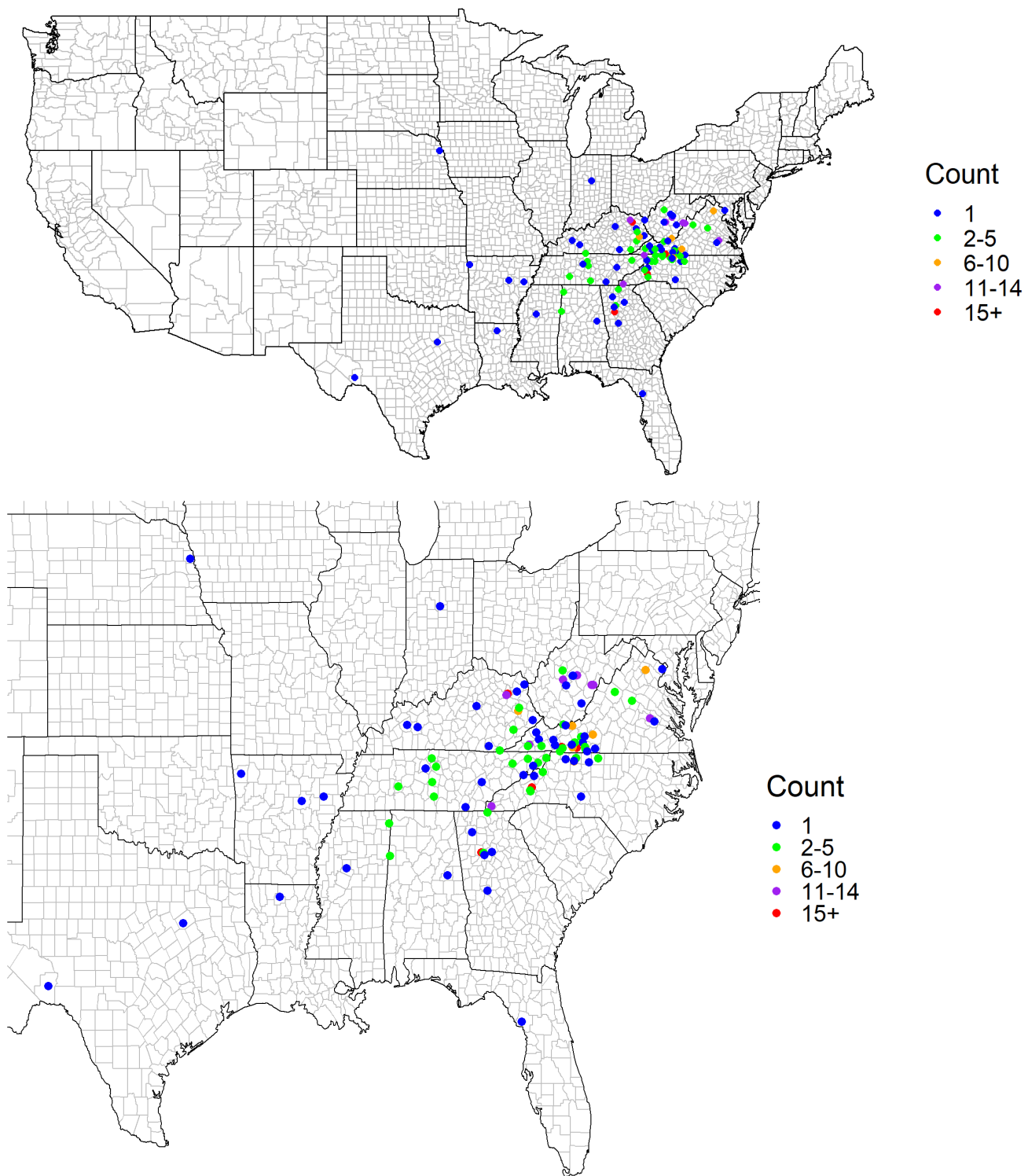
# 5    Appendix



**Figure 4:** Top is a map 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.
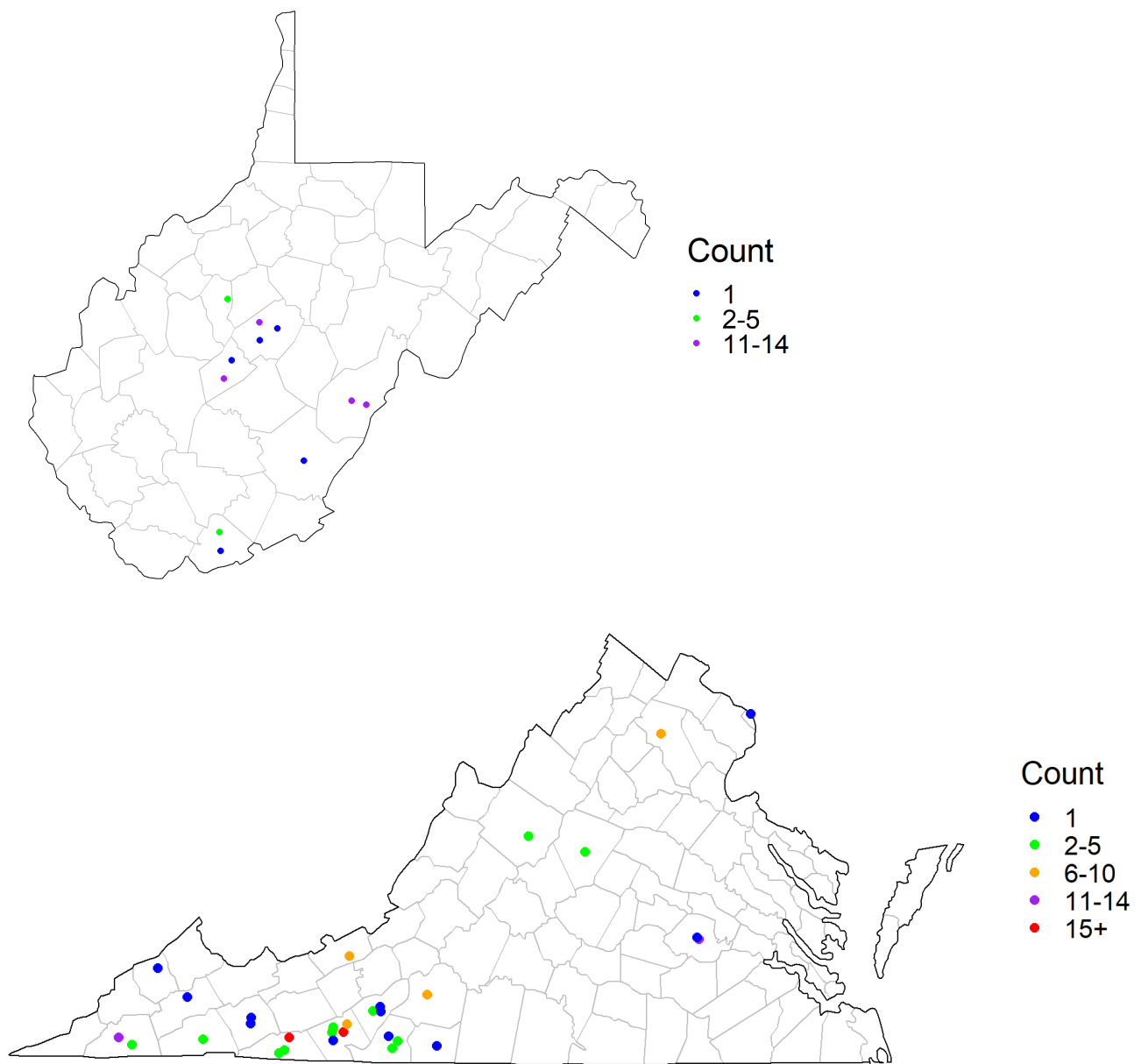
**Figure 5:** West Virginia, and Virginia artist counts. The red dots corresponding to Emmett Lundy in Grayson county and Norman Edmonds in Carroll county Virginia. The two artists in the city of Richmond, are attributed to Chesterfield county since cities are not included in this study.
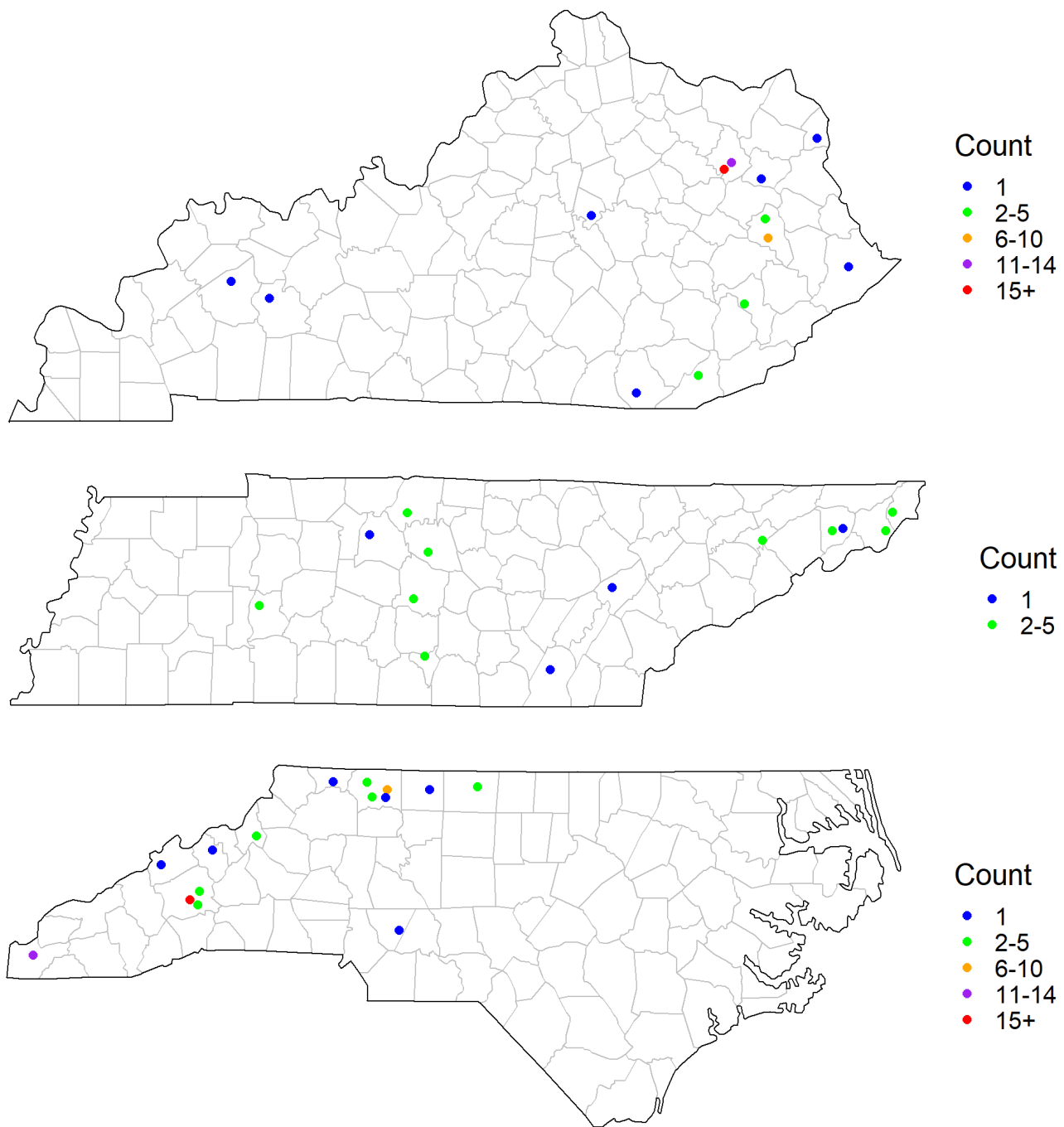
**Figure 6:** Kentucky, and Tennessee artist counts. The red dot in Kentucky corresponds to Ed Haley, and the red dot in North Carolina corresponds to Marcus Martin.
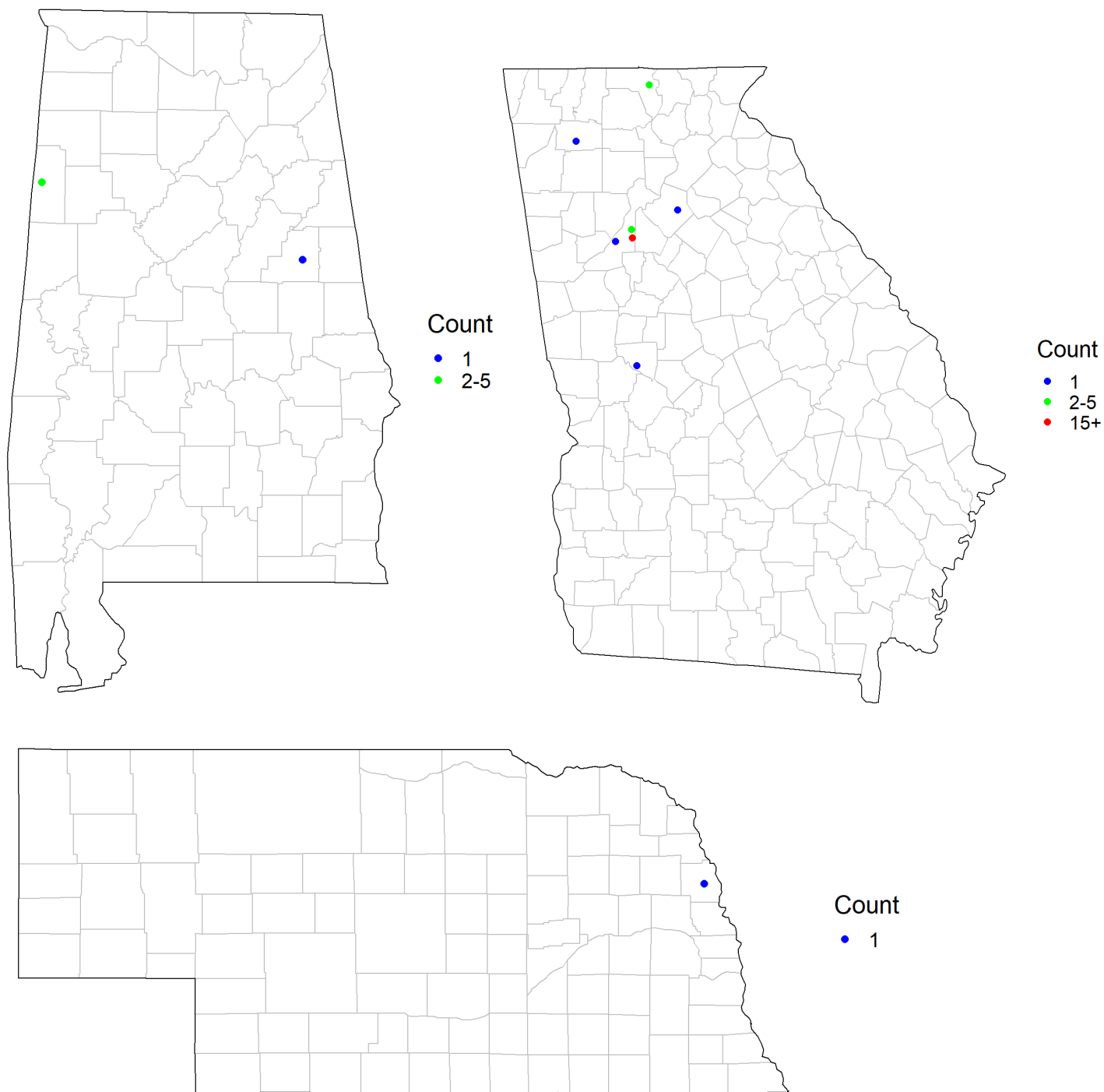
**Figure 7:** Alabama, Georgia, and Nebraska artist counts. The three artists in the city of Atlanta, are attributed to Fulton County since cities are not included in this study.
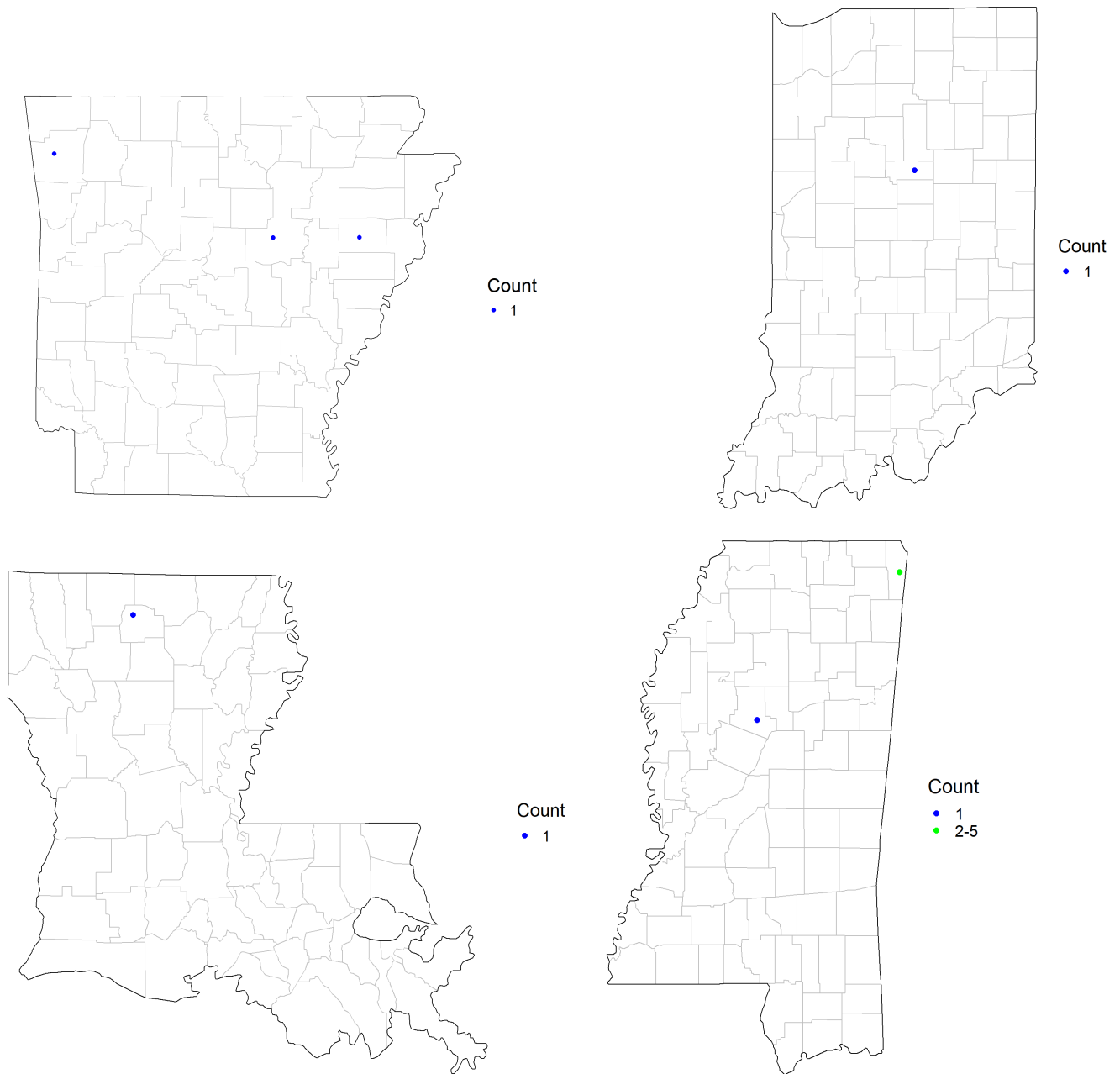
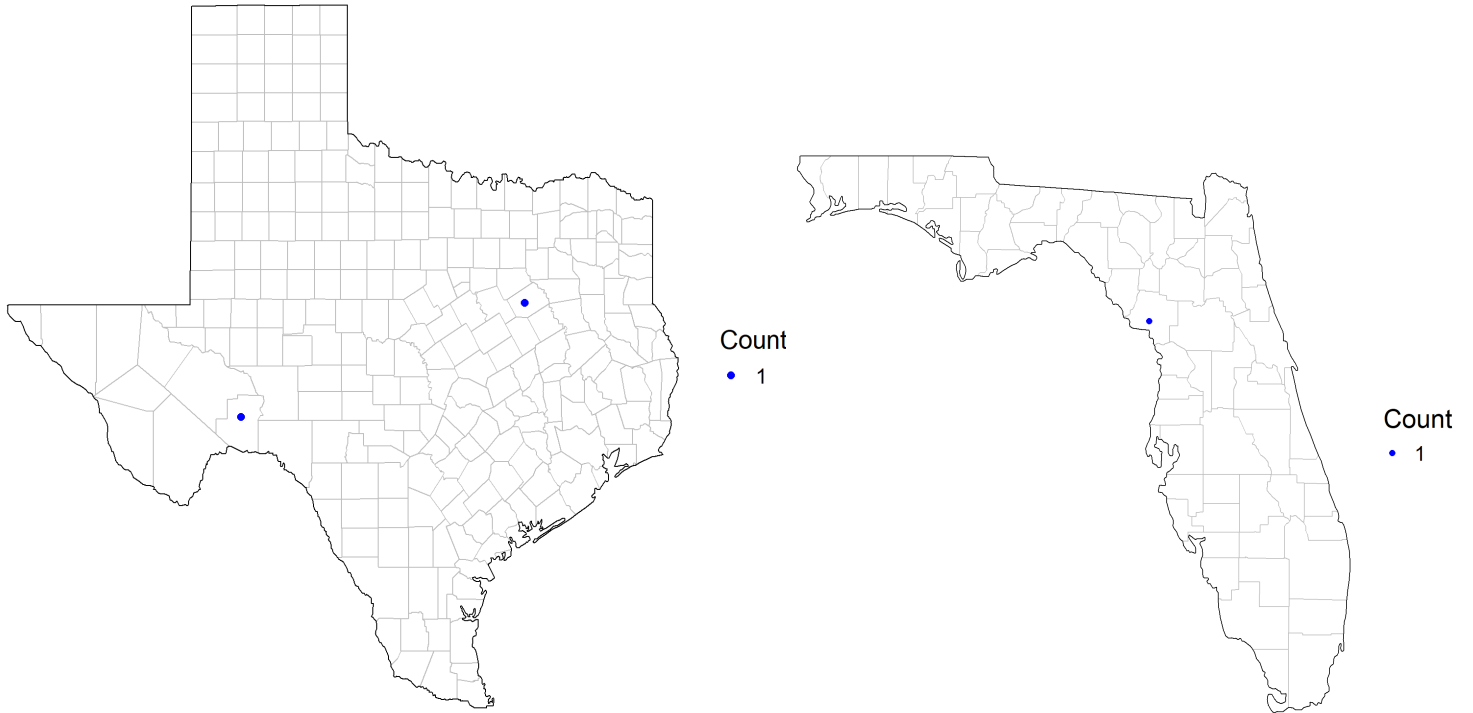**Figure 8:** Arkansas, Louisiana, Mississippi, and Indiana artist counts.

**Figure 9:** Texas and Florida artist counts.