



Dark-eyed junco

Junco hyemalis By Sneed B. Collard III

SCIENTIFIC NAME *Junco* is the Latin word for reed bunting, a dark-headed Old World songbird that superficially resembles the dark-eyed junco. *Hyemalis* is Latin for “of winter.”

They show up under our bird feeder the first or second week of October: handsome little birds with rufous backs, pink bills, and solid black or gray heads. Unlike the chickadees and nuthatches that pluck seeds directly from the feeder, these new arrivals stake out the ground, sorting through the spillage while marking the inexorable change of seasons. In doing so, they radiate a sense of well-being, a message that all is well with the natural world even as winter approaches. Fittingly, John J. Audubon joined previous generations of naturalists in calling this sparrow the snowbird. Today we know it as the dark-eyed junco.

APPEARANCE

Larger than many other sparrows, the dark-eyed junco offers a welcome relief from the usual streaky brown sparrow color scheme of winter birds. Juncos sport attractive, relatively solid shades of brown, rust, black, and

gray that contrast with a clean white belly. In most varieties, the head is a uniform gray or black that stands out from the rest of the body, though this can be subtle in slate-colored birds. Juncos are most easily identified in the field by the flash of their white outer tail feathers as they take flight.

CLASSIFICATION

In part because different groups of juncos have markedly different color palettes, this species has been caught in a scientific nomenclature tug of war. Until the 1970s, the dark-eyed junco was split into five distinct species, and some ornithologists still adhere to this scheme. According to Cornell Lab of Ornithology’s Birds of the World, however, scientists currently recognize five “groups” of dark-eyed juncos, each containing between one and eight subspecies. In western Montana, the Oregon group, with rufous backs and dark heads, predominates. In central Montana, you’re more likely to see the pink-sided group, with pinkish flanks and light gray

heads. As you move east, you enter the territory of the especially beautiful slate-colored group. But be warned: It’s common to see members of different groups cavorting together!

SOUND

Dark-eyed juncos produce a medium- to fast-paced trill often confused with that of chipping sparrows, but it’s a sweeter, more musical sound. While juncos begin singing by mid-March, chipping sparrows do not generally return to Montana until late April—a useful clue when trying to identify a spring chorus.

DISTRIBUTION AND HABITAT

The dark-eyed junco can be found year-round in much of the West, upper Midwest, and Northeast. In winter, it ranges throughout the Lower 48 except for certain parts of Florida and other Gulf Coast states. This species occupies a wide variety of forest habitats including burned forest. A mix of open ground and tree cover seems to be ideal. While the birds generally breed in natural forests, flocks often move into suburban and urban settings each fall and winter.

FEEDING AND BREEDING

Like other sparrows, the dark-eyed junco depends mostly on seeds, but will eat insects, spiders, and other invertebrates, especially during breeding season. Females build cup nests in small cavities, sloping banks, root balls of fallen trees, tree branches, bases of trees and bushes, and even barns and other structures. Most commonly, the female lays three to five pale, elliptical eggs and performs all incubation duties. Both parents defend the nest and feed the young.

CONSERVATION

The nation’s second-most abundant songbirds behind American robins, dark-eyed juncos number in the hundreds of millions. As with many other songbirds, however, populations have decreased in recent decades. In Montana, surveys indicate that dark-eyed junco numbers declined 2.6 percent per year between 1966 and 2010. Major culprits include habitat loss, collisions with buildings and other structures, and predation by outdoor cats. 🐈

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