



As Snow Flies, Snowbirds Arrive

By Dawn Pettinelli, UConn Home & Garden Education Center

It's not the trees releasing their once vibrant foliage or the sunken faces of decomposing Jack'O Lanterns or even the browning mums that signal winter will soon overtake our ever increasingly barren landscapes as much as this time of expanding daily darkness aligns with the arrival of the snow birds. These sweet, little, small sparrows with their plumage reminiscent of 'grey skies above and snow below' are the very abundant dark-eyed juncos, many of which hail from northern climes to overwinter in more moderate locations.

Dark-eyed juncos are very easily recognized with their slate-grey head, chest, wings and back and a snowy white belly. The grey areas may seem a bit darker or more brownish in particular individuals. Females and immatures may have more of a brownish overwash and some immatures have streaked breasts. In general, the dark-eyed juncos are about 6 inches long and only weigh two-thirds of an ounce. How these tiny birds can survive harsh winter conditions, never fails to amaze.



Photo by Chace Pettinelli, 2021

Aside from our familiar eastern slate-colored junco, until the 1970s, it was assumed there were 5 western species including the Oregon, pink-sided, grey-headed, white-winged and red-backed.

Even though their breeding grounds are in distinctive geographic regions and their coloration varies, they are deemed one species as they will interbreed in areas where ranges overlap. Just as Darwin was able to explore speciation in finches in the Galapagos islands, perhaps researchers in the U.S are seeing it here with the dark-eyed junco.

Our snowbird visitors typically live between 3 to 11 years. The main limitation to longevity are predators, ranging from hawks to domestic or feral cats. With the approach of wintry weather, juncos from the cool, northern boreal forests migrate to warmer, or at least more moderate sections of the country to find food and water as the winter months prevail. Preferred habitats consist of cool conifer forests and mixed woodlands. Juncos inhabit a large swarth of northern North America from Alaska, across Canada, to New England. They may over winter as far south as northern Florida and Texas.

Usually breeding pairs are not found in Connecticut although some have been documented in the northeastern and northwestern part of the state. They prefer the northern boreal forests of Canada and although broad swaths remain, they are increasingly being logged for virgin paper products, which is one reason to consider purchasing recycled paper products if possible.

Dark-eyed juncos are monogamous. Mature males often brave weather extremes to stake out prime northern breeding grounds. Pairs form in mid-April as females return and it is not uncommon for males to stay within 50 feet of their mate. Once paired, females make nests typically on the ground in slight depressions and at the edge of woodlands, well concealed with grasses, tree roots, weeds, or by fallen logs. Nests are made from grasses, moss, feathers, small twigs and lined with soft feathers, hairs and fine grasses.

Females typically lay 3 to 5 whitish to pale grey eggs with brownish markings that hatch in 11 to 13 days. Both parents feed the young partially regurgitated food as well as soft insects, such as caterpillars. Young birds quickly develop and leave the nest 9 to 13 days after hatching. Parents may tend to them for a couple more weeks but then go back to raising another clutch or two before the season ends. Juncos are fully mature and able to breed at about a year of age.

During the warmer months, adults feed primarily on a variety of insects, including garden pests. Their fare might consist of beetles, grasshoppers, caterpillars, spiders and other insects. Juncos also consume quite a few weed and grass seeds with crabgrass, ragweed, pigweed and dropseedgrass being sought after. They are ground feeders and are often found scratching around in garden beds or other more open areas.

At the feeder in winter, flocks of juncos favor white millet, black oil sunflower and nyjer thistle seeds. Since they do search for seeds on the ground, perhaps a short platform feeder could be set up for them or some seed could be sprinkled on the ground in bird feeding areas. Because they need the extra energy during the colder months, juncos may forage an average of 6 hours a day to fulfill their nutritional needs. Setting out bird feeders and seed provides them and other avian species with critical energy through the cold, snowy winter months and supplies us with the satisfaction of assisting our fine feathered friends and being able to observe their activities and cheery vocalizations.

For information on other gardening topics, feel free to contact us, toll-free, at the UConn Home & Garden Education Center at (877) 486-6271, visit our website at www.ladybug.uconn.edu or contact your local Cooperative Extension center.