



EC 1603 • April 2007
\$1.00



Dark-eyed Junco

Junco hyemalis

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The dark-eyed junco is found throughout most of the United States. Juncos sometimes are referred to as snowbirds, because they often are seen at birdfeeders in the winter.

All juncos belong to the sparrow family. Five subspecies are recognized, based on the coloring of their feathers. The “Oregon” dark-eyed junco is the most common type in the Pacific Northwest.



Photo: Neah Stryker

Juncos belong to the sparrow family.



Where they live and why

Dark-eyed juncos live in a variety of habitats, including suburbs, parks, forests, stream edges, and brushy areas near grasslands. These habitats provide a variety of resources for juncos.

Seeds are an important source of nutrition for juncos, especially in the winter. It is common to see flocks of juncos feeding on the ground in winter. You may see them using their feet to scratch the ground and find seeds.

Grasslands and shrub habitats are home to a variety of insects, including grubs and spiders, which are a food source for juncos during the breeding season.



Photo: Donna Dewhurst, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

Vegetation is a great source of cover.

Protection is an important characteristic of juncos' habitat. Juncos are eaten by predators such as cats, hawks, and raccoons, so it is important that they have plenty of protection. Vegetation is a great source of cover.

Species description

Dark-eyed juncos are small birds, about 4 to 6 inches tall. Their coloring depends on where they live. The Oregon junco is brown with a black head. Its coloring makes it look like it is wearing a hood. Its belly is white, and its tail feathers are gray with white outer feathers. Males tend to be a bit bigger than females, and their plumage usually is brighter. Juncos have a short, conical bill.

Juncos are monogamous, which means they have only one mate. Nesting usually occurs in the spring. First, the male junco establishes a territory, which is an area of habitat that he will defend. The territory will contain everything needed for nesting, including food, water, and nest-building materials.

Males perch high in a tree and sing to attract females and to scare away other breeding males. A female chooses her mate based on his vocalization and territory-defending skills.

Juncos are ground nesters and often build their nests in a depression in the side of a bank or steep slope. The nest usually is in an area with lots of cover, such as tall grasses. It is primarily

the female's duty to build the nest.

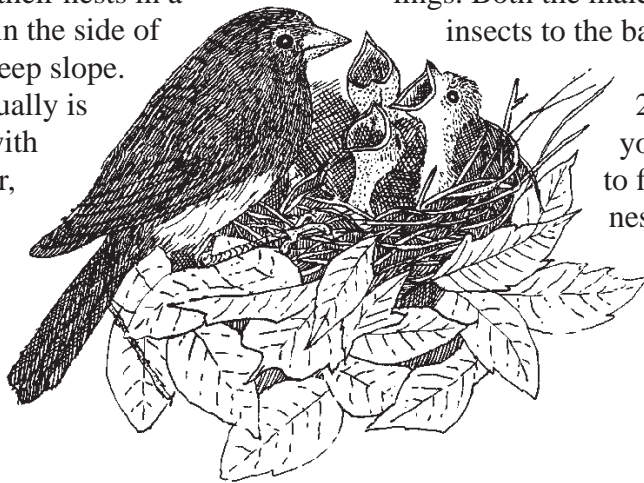
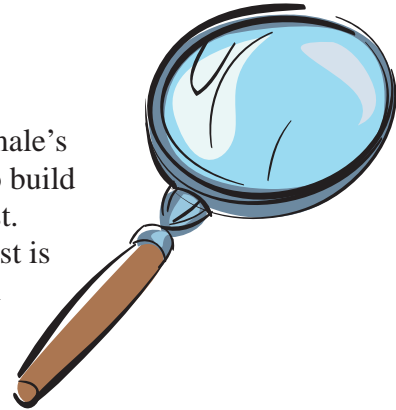
The nest is shaped like a cup and

made of grasses and bark. Some females line their nest with soft grasses or animal hair.

Juncos breed between March and May. The female usually lays three to five eggs. The eggs are bluish-white with dark blotches. The female incubates the eggs (sits on them) for 11 to 14 days. During nesting, the parents eat whatever insects are available. Junco pairs usually have two broods per season.

When they hatch, the baby juncos are altricial, which means their eyes are closed, they have no feathers, and they are completely dependent on the care provided by their parents. These youngest baby birds are called nestlings. Both the male and female feed insects to the baby birds.

After about 2 weeks, the young birds learn to fly and leave the nest. At this time, they are called fledglings.



Creating habitat



Juncos often can be found feeding and nesting in residential areas, including schoolyards and backyard habitats.

It is easy to attract juncos to most areas because they are very social birds.

Although juncos are primarily ground feeders, it's not a good idea to scatter seeds on the ground because they can absorb moisture and spoil. Platform feeders work well for juncos, but they can attract unwanted animals such as rats and mice. Birds feeding on platforms also are more vulnerable to predators.

You can buy or make a platform feeder with a cage over it that allows birds to enter but keeps other species out. You can also place bird feeders near trees and shrubs, so that juncos can feed in an area that provides some cover and safety.



Photo: Noah Stryker

It is easy to attract juncos to most areas because they are very social birds.

Juncos enjoy millet and sunflower seeds. Millet also attracts other birds, such as quail and spotted towhees. Sunflower seeds attract a variety of songbirds.

If you leave grasses unmowed, they will produce seed that can be an important food for juncos in the winter. Juncos climb grass stems and push the seedheads to the ground. Once a stem is bent to the ground, the juncos can eat the seeds.



Photo: Lee Karney, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

Juncos often can be found feeding and nesting in residential areas, including schoolyards and backyard habitats.



Photo: Noah Stryker

Juncos are spotted at more feeding areas than any other bird in North America.

Fun facts



Males sing more than females. In fact, females rarely sing.



Juncos can use both feet at the same time to turn over leaves and search for food.



According to Project Feeder Watch, juncos are spotted at more feeding areas than any other bird in North America. Eighty percent of the people responding reported seeing juncos at their feeders.

Learn more!

The Audubon Society Field Guide to North American Birds, Western Region. 1977. Alfred A. Knopf, Inc. Cornell Laboratory of Ornithology. <http://www.birds.cornell.edu/BOW/DEJU/>

The Sibley Guide to Bird Life and Behavior. 2001. Alfred A. Knopf, Inc. Wild-Bird-Watching.com. <http://www.wild-bird-watching.com/junco.html> Wild Birds Unlimited. <http://www.wbu.com/edu/junco.htm>



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Published April 2007.