

Dark-Eyed Junco

Junco hyemalis

The family *Emberizidae* encompasses a variety of widespread species, including juncos, sparrows, towhees, longspurs and Emberizid buntings. Juncos are common but small, rather tame sparrows with light pink bills, gray or black hoods and white outer tail feathers. Often in large flocks, they hop on the ground and pick at seeds, but seldom scratch with their feet. Streaked juveniles on the breeding ground resemble sparrows except in tail pattern and voice. Juncos may be difficult to identify as most species display a variety of immature, seasonal and regional plumages. Currently, the Dark-eyed Junco includes six recognizable populations, all similar in shape, voice and habit but differing mainly in body and head color. Head and breast color, along with range and habitat are the most helpful clues in their identification.



The Slate-colored Junco is the race of Dark-eyed Junco that predominantly occurs in Alaska. In summer, this form breeds throughout the coniferous boreal forest. At 16cm, these birds are small and slender. The hood (head, nape, throat), breast and back are uniformly slate-gray, contrasting with the bright white belly and undertail coverts. Characteristic features include the broad, pink bill and the striking, white outer tail-feathers, conspicuous in flight. Females are brownish gray overall, while juveniles of all races are streaked in brown.

The song of the Dark-eyed Junco is musical trill sung on one pitch, much like a telephone ring. Often, these birds will sing in winter. Their call note is a sharp

"dit" while the flight call is a rapid twittering. Remarkably, the songs of most races are indistinguishable.

Both parents assemble the cup-shaped ground nest on a bank or near a vertical surface (rarely in a shrub or tree). Placed in a cavity or shallow depression and concealed by overhead vegetation, the nest is constructed of coarse grasses, forbs, mosses, rootlets, bark and twig. Fine materials line the inside of the nest, providing a soft cushion for the 3-6, 19mm eggs of the clutch. Eggs are white to pale bluish-white and are marked or occasionally wreathed in reddish brown. Unaided, the female incubates the clutch (for 12-13 days) and broods the nestlings. One amazing adaptation in these birds is the extremely rapid tarsal (long bones of the feet) development of the nestlings. Before they are able to fly, this adaptation enables nestlings to flee from danger on foot! After hatching, young birds fledge in 9-13 days and are cared for by both parents.



Dark-eyed Juncos consume a wide variety of seeds, as well as insects and spiders. Although they rarely scratch with their feet, juncos forage by hopping along and gleaning seeds from the forest floor. In the spring and fall, they form foraging flocks with chickadees, kinglets and other sparrows.

The Slate-colored, Dark-eyed Junco winters among open woods and brushy clearings, mainly in North America. In winter, they occur throughout the midwestern, southern and southeastern states and also in northern Mexico. Males tend to winter further north than females. During the breeding season, they range throughout most of mainland Alaska and Canada, stretching eastward to Nova Scotia and as far south as Michigan.