

Birds: Juncos

by Sally Cureton

One of my favorite birds of the winter is here now - the dark-eyed junco. A friendly little bird, they have a slate colored back with white wings and a slightly pink bill. Sometimes called "snowbirds," juncos are a unique bird that is rarely confused with any other. They are a member of the sparrow family, but slightly smaller and more slender than the house sparrow that we are all familiar with.

Juncos tend to winter in the same spots each year. The ones that we see migrate from Canada to Virginia and further south. Although there is a population of Juncos in the highlands of the Appalachian mountains in Maryland and Virginia they migrate to the south as far as the Piedmont each year. The first birds to arrive on the wintering grounds will be the older and more dominate ones. Males tend to winter farther north than the females so geography can determine the ratio of males to females in a flock.

They will form into their flocks from late October and maintain this structure through the first part of April. Within this flock, there is a rigid social hierarchy. Males dominate females and adults dominate the immature birds. Each flock will forage in an area of ten to twelve acres. They may form smaller flocks within the larger one, but they all stay within their specific area. They are willing to share their area with another flock if food is scarce. They generally roost in a dense conifer where they can be protected from the weather and predators.

You have surely seen these birds each year in the winter as they use both feet to "double-scratch" to expose seeds and insects. Juncos prefer to feed from the ground than to pick from an elevated feeder. They are partial to seeds of common weeds. Their bills are conical, cone-shaped, making them adept at crushing these seeds. In the summer, insects constitute about half or more of their diet.

As spring approaches they start singing and initiate courtship displays. Their song is usually a simple trill, but will occasionally include two or three trills on different pitches, joined together in a single song. By March or April, these birds will have left us to move back to their breeding grounds, but we can enjoy their antics in the meantime.