

STILLMAN NEWSLETTER



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SLATE-COLORED SNOWBIRDS

-- Mark Spreyer

While having lunch last fall with some volunteers, one of them showed me a picture of a bird and asked me what kind it was.

It was a slate-colored junco also known as a snowbird.

Her query reminded me of something John James Audubon had written back in 1831, "there is not an individual in the Union who does not know the little Snow-bird." Obviously, this is no longer the case which is what prompted me to write this article.

Juggling Juncos

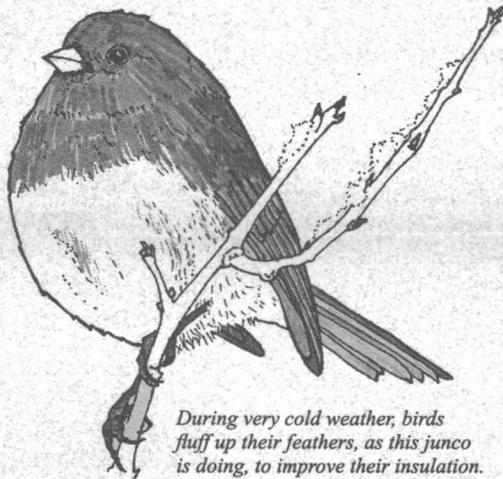
Let's start by trying to explain the confusing assortment of names that have been assigned to this flashy little sparrow. If you're not a junco junkie, so to speak, feel free to skip ahead to the next section of this column.

Ornithologists first used the junco label at about the same time Audubon penned his snowbird comments. Junco comes from the Latin *juncus* meaning a rush or reed. This was a singularly inappropriate choice for a genus of sparrows found in woodlands not wetlands.

Problems with organizing the juncos continued through the centuries. In 1917, L. Nelson Nichols wrote of the snowbird that scientists have:

...done so many things to him that ordinary bird observers and the scientists themselves are quite distracted. First they are disputing over the various races of Snowbirds, not sure just how many different species and varieties to list.

Now, let's move the disputes ahead to the 1960s. When I was a kid, field guides listed five junco species. In 1983, four of these five species, including the slate-colored variety, were lumped together and named the dark-eyed or northern junco (*Junco hyemalis*).



During very cold weather, birds fluff up their feathers, as this junco is doing, to improve their insulation.

The four former species are now regarded as recognizable populations. The population that commonly visits our feeders is the slate-colored junco and that's the snowbird I'll be describing for most of this story.

A Flurry of Snowbirds

The slate-colored junco is the size of a house sparrow. Its head, back, and chest are slate-gray while its underside is white. It has a short, stout, light-colored beak and a noticeable tail.

When folded, the tail looks mostly gray. When in flight or during some displays (see below), it flashes its conspicuous white outer tail feathers. Spotting these feathers is the easiest way to identify this junco.

An old-time description of the slate-colored junco goes, "leaden skies above, snow below."

Some think it was dubbed the snowbird because of its white belly. I think there is a more plausible explanation.

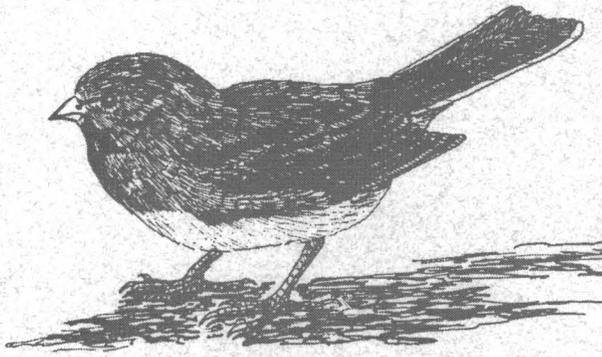
You see, dark-eyed juncos breed in mixed-coniferous or coniferous forests across the western U.S., Canada, and in the Appalachians.

They are only here and in much of the U.S. for the colder months, roughly October through May.

So when the juncos arrive, winter snowfalls aren't far behind. Also, the bird's scientific species name, *hyemalis*, means wintry. Yes, a snowbird indeed.

STILLMAN NATURE CENTER

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Junco Science

Much of what we know about wild birds we owe to juncos. Since they are easy to capture and tolerate experimental manipulation, junco data guides conservation biologists and forest managers as well as physiological and behavioral researchers.

In the early twentieth century, for example, pioneering studies in bird migration and reproduction were done with juncos. Researchers stimulated juncos to breed under sub-zero winter conditions simply by subjecting them to artificially lengthened days.

It is now common knowledge that increasing day-length (aka photoperiod) triggers spring migration and breeding among many bird species.

It should be noted that other cultures had been aware of this for centuries. Japanese bird fanciers, practicing the art of *Yogai*, stimulated caged birds to sing in midwinter by using candlelight to “lengthen” the days.

Feeder Pecking Order

You don’t have to be an ornithologist to conduct behavioral studies. All you need to do is feed the birds and watch the juncos as they forage for seed on the ground.

You’ll notice that they often feed in small flocks. Also, like other perching birds, they don’t walk but hop, using both legs at the same time.

Now if a layer of snow is covering the feeding area, they vigorously shuffle those paired feet hoping to expose seed. Like a construction crew on a deadline, they aren’t messing around. And, as with the crew, seniority must be respected.

As you might expect, the older birds dominate the younger ones and the males will chase after females.

The *pecking-attack* is one of the most observed aggressive displays. This takes place between a dominant and subordinate bird. The dominant, usually an older junco, sleeks his head and neck feathers, extends his neck horizontally, and leaps or flutters toward the subordinate. Usually, the younger bird retreats but if not, it might get pecked on the head or neck.

One of the more protracted displays, called a *head dance*, occurs between unfamiliar individuals of high social rank. In this face-to-face encounter, the two juncos approach each other with their legs and necks stretched vertically. Then they raise and lower their bills repeatedly.

Now if there is a stand-off; those white tail feathers are put to work in the *tail-up* display.

Here the junco does what he or she can to look bigger. The bill is opened, the wings slightly raised, and the tail fanned and elevated above the head. When you see this display, you can tell that that is one bad snowbird!

Dressing for the Occasion

Early in this article I described the slate-colored junco as a “flashy little sparrow.”

I wanted to separate it from the many drab, streaked, brown sparrows. Perhaps, stylish would have been a better choice of words than flashy. We’re not talking formal wear though, we’re talking blue-collar style.

When it comes to capturing the spirit and style of this winter resident, the following poem about juncos really hits the nail on the head.

*They operate from elsewhere,
Some hall in the mountains--
quick visit, gone.
Specialists on branch ends,
craft union. I like their
clean little coveralls.*

--William Stafford

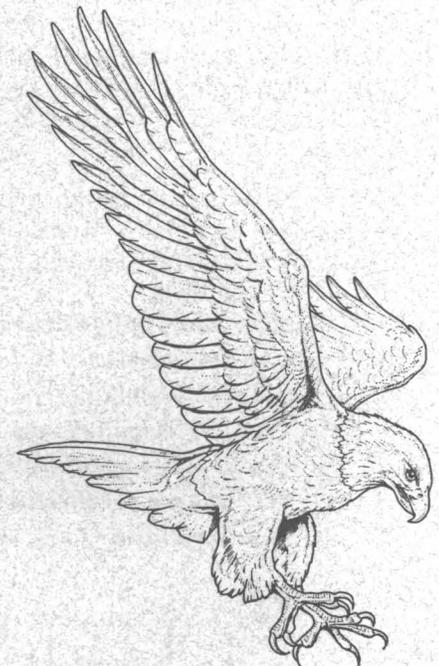
EAGLE SCOUT CANDIDATES HELP BIRDS & IMPROVE TRAILS

This past autumn, Dylan Alcarese from Troop 392 completed much-needed trail repairs to our Goldfinch Trail.

Over the years, I have suggested improving this trail to other scouts. To his credit, Dylan took on this labor-intensive project and saw it through to completion in a relatively short period of time. He was able to do so by organizing twenty-seven volunteer helpers.

Also this past fall, Rajeev Jayaraman from Troop 927 and a senior at Barrington High School organized twenty-four volunteers. His crew built two benches that are located along the Lakeside Trail. They also replaced roughly two dozen aging screech owl and bluebird nest boxes. Finally, they built six wood duck boxes for future use.

Stillman’s trails and birdhouses are much better off thanks to Rajeev’s and Dylan’s efforts.



PROGRAMS

Program Basics: PLEASE CALL OR FAX US AT (847) 428-OWLS(6957), OR EMAIL STILLMAN: stillinc@wildblue.net TO MAKE RESERVATIONS for programs. Remember to include your name, phone number, and the number of people that will be attending.

If less than five people plan to attend two days prior to a program, the activity could be cancelled. So, don't forget to call the nature center in advance. If you discover that you are unable to attend, please call to cancel your reservations. This courtesy will be greatly appreciated.

NEW YEAR'S DAY WALK

It's time again for our annual New Year's Day walk along Stillman's trails. Over the years, we've seen everything from bluebirds and shrikes to the remains of coyote kills. If you like winter, don't like football, or just want to greet 2012 outdoors; this is the walk for you.

Date: Tuesday, Jan. 1
Time: 10:00AM
Age: 10 years and up



THURSDAY TREKKERS

Join us outside for a healthy hour-long walk around a lake, through the woods, and who knows where else? Why not add Stillman to your list of exercise options? Come prepared to hike the trails with sturdy winter boots.

Dates: Thursdays, Jan. 3, Feb. 7, March 7
Time: 9:30AM
Fee: None

SNOWSHOEING with L.L. BEAN

To help you sample Stillman's winter scenery in a novel way, call the L.L. Bean store in S. Barrington at 1-888-552-5548 and register for an introductory snowshoeing adventure. Conditions permitting, Bean's snowshoeing classes are scheduled every Saturday and Sunday through March 10. Starlight snowshoe tours scheduled for Friday evenings through March. Don't forget to register with L.L. Bean in advance and here's hoping for snowy weekends!

SCAT & TRACK

Susan Allman will show you how to recognize the different types of scats and tracks made by winter's active animals. After an indoor introduction, explore Stillman's trails for signs of rabbit, squirrel, deer and fox. If there is no snow, we'll still go out to get the scoop on nature's poop. Remember to call (847) 428-OWLS to make reservations.

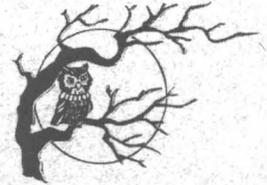
Date: Sunday, Jan. 13
Time: 2:00PM
Fee: None



OWL MOON NIGHT HIKE

After an indoor program on owls, we will walk the trails in search of Stillman's great horned and screech owls. You'll be able to enjoy the winter landscape under the nearly full moon. Space is limited so call (847) 428-OWLS to make reservations. Don't forget to dress warmly.

Date: Saturday, Jan. 26
Time: 6:30PM
Age: 8 years and up
Member's Fee: Free
Non-member's Fee: \$5.00



RAPTORS for PHOTOGRAPHERS

At the request of photographers, Stillman is offering our first winter raptor photography day. Now's your chance to get a close-up of a peregrine falcon, broad-winged hawk, red-shouldered hawk plus great horned, barn, barred, and screech owls. We will bring the birds out in the afternoon light to increase your chances of getting that perfect image.

Drop by anytime between 3:00 and 4:30PM.

Date: Saturday, Feb. 2
Time: 3:00 - 4:30 PM
Fee: \$20/person



TREE IDENTIFICATION

Learn how to identify common trees such as cherry, maple, pine, and cedar. Easy to remember tips and simple hand-outs will keep you from barking up the wrong tree! Come prepared for the weather and bring your questions.

Date: Sunday, Feb. 10
Time: 2:00PM
Age: 10 years and up
Fee: None

WOODCOCK WATCH

In past years, the woodcocks have put on quite a show. Hopefully, the weather will cooperate and we'll have another good nuptial display this year. Bring your binoculars and come join the fun!

Date: Saturday, March 16
Time: 6:15PM
Fee: None
Age: 10 years and up



RENEWAL REMINDER

If you see a 12 or smaller number after your name, this will be your last newsletter until you renew. If you didn't receive our annual membership letter, just use the form on the back of this newsletter or visit stillmann.org and click on "Become a Member or Volunteer." *We need your support.* Thank you.

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If you aren't already a member, please consider joining us.

Yes, I'd like to become or continue as a member of the Stillman Nature Center.

You can also join online, just visit stillmannc.org and click on "Become a Member or Volunteer." Volunteer opportunities include teaching classes, clearing trails, and fundraising.

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