

# The junco reminds us that every bird counts

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Today, I'd like to give thanks for juncos.

Yes, you read it right. Little dark-eyed juncos. You'd recognize 'em, even if you don't know 'em by name. They are the drab gray dickie-birds that show up in North Jersey after the trees shed their leaves.

I paid juncos no-never-mind until a friend pronounced them "boring." The label stuck in my brain because — let's face it — they're as colorful as an overcast afternoon. Their so-called song (an extended trill) is nothing to text home about. And their annual arrival is nature's way of announcing that winter approacheth.

Now that I've raised the ire of junco lovers from Alpine to the Great Swamp, I'd just like to say that I am doing my best to change my doleful tune.

After spying my first junco of the season in mid-November — a whole flock of them, no less — I decided that if I couldn't beat 'em, I'd at least get to know them.



**A dark-eyed junco lived up to its "snow-bird" nickname in a Waldwick backyard last winter.**

COURTESY OF BARBARA DILGER

I asked myself where they come from and why I should try to like them.

Here's what I learned from some of my favorite bird books:

My trusty Sibley's points out that there are at least six populations of dark-eye juncos, that the ones we see in North Jersey are the slate-colored varie-

ty, and that they flock together in winter.

None other than John James Audubon himself gave them their nickname in his classic "Birds of America" back in the early 1800s: "Indeed, there is not an individual in the Union who does not know the little snow-bird..."

Audubon adds: "It is a true hopping bird, and performs its little leaps without the least appearance of moving either feet or legs, in which circumstance it resembles the Sparrows."

In "Useful Birds and their Protection" (1908), Edward Howe Forbush observes: "Juncos come from the north with the first hard frost, and are among the most abundant of our fall migrants. ... A flock of these dark birds on the new-fallen snow is an interesting sight on a cold winter's day as they come familiarly about the house or barnyard."

The best description of juncos is in "The Burgess Bird Book for Children" (1947): "There was no mistaking Slaty the junco for any other bird. His head, throat and breast were clear slate color. Underneath he was white. His bill was flesh-colored. It looked almost white."

What drove home the value of juncos was a little competition I have with

friends to see who can see the most species of birds from one place in 30 minutes. I was at Minute 29, and desperate for a higher tally.

"Where are the juncos when you need them?" I muttered, to no avail. Moments after the contest ended, a pair of juncos flew to my feeders. Just to annoy me, no doubt.

The junco and the birding competition were timely reminders: Every bird counts, even when you're not keeping score.

Which brings me to a fine poem called "Bird Watching" by the late John Ciardi. He writes about putting out food for avian visitors and observing the scene:

"A bird is a bird as long as it is there," he writes. "Then it is a miracle our crumbs and sunflowers let go. ... And if some miracles are rarer than others, every incredible bird has crumbs and seeds in common with every other."

Thus, on this Thanksgiving Day, I give thanks for juncos and other small miracles.

*The Bird-watcher column appears every other Thursday. Email Jim at [celeiryfarm@gmail.com](mailto:celeiryfarm@gmail.com).*