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Snowbirds: Sometimes They Stay

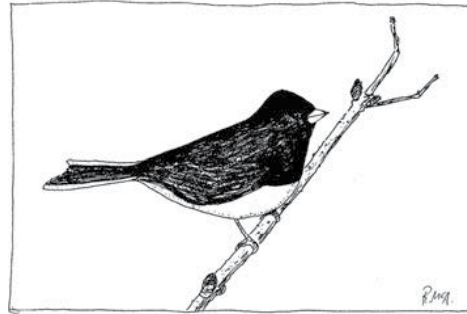
The dark-eyed juncos have been here all winter. We may find our winters cold, dark, and difficult, but to these and other “snowbirds” Monterey is an easy southern place to spend the winter. To us folks, snowbird means someone from around here who goes south, maybe to Florida, not to return until spring. But sometimes these seasonal neighbors decide to stay. Maybe they tighten up the Monterey house so it is cozy in the winter. Maybe they are still hunkering here until it feels safe to travel. Most people do not think of Monterey as the place with the warm winter.

For the juncos, and other avian snowbirds, this is easy street in winter. But about this time in spring some are putting on fat to fuel their trip north to their breeding grounds. And even if they are ones who have decided to stay, they need more energy now for the strength to reproduce. Every day the gonads are growing, responding to longer day length.

Back in the day, ornithologists understood there to be several different kinds of juncos. They were called slate-colored junco, Oregon junco, white-winged junco, pink-sided junco, Coue’s western junco. They looked different from each other and were separated geographically. But where their ranges overlapped, they would interbreed and for some people this was enough to put all the different groups together as one species. Such taxonomists are known as “lumpers,” the others as “splitters,” and never the twain shall meet. If we are used to doing things a certain way, we have a hard time giving it up, especially if all our old bird books give us four or five different kinds of juncos. And now we have DNA studies informing what we think we know about what species we are looking at. It ain’t easy.

I met a young man on the train in New Mexico and he knew a lot about edible plants and how to make things out of nettle fibers, for instance. He was working on a length of rope. I asked him if he ever did anything with phragmites, and he gave me a blank look. I described this “common reed” that shows up in disturbed areas and wetlands. It has gorgeous plume of a seed head and grows thickly and tall.

“Oh yes,” he said. “I didn’t know the name but I know it. I know its energy.”



I want to know the energy of the junco, no matter what anyone’s current idea may be of its name.

A friend in Monterey has had what he feels are the same twenty-five juncos at the feeder all winter. He has taken the feeders down now that the bears are up, and will miss the little snowbirds. Some may fly north, often in the same traveling groups year after year. Some will stay.

Years ago, we had a junco nesting on the ground right in our garden. This was a sandy place, where we’d planted popcorn and mulched the rows with straw. When I went near, a little bird flew out of a billow of mulch. After that I kept my distance and hoped she’d do okay.

Another time we had a junco nesting outside our doorway. We’d hung a plastic flowerpot there with quite a spray of jasmine vines looping up and out of it. I used to poke my fingers into the dirt to see if it needed water, and one time when I did this, I felt a stout cup of twigs among the delicate jasmine vines. It was a nest, and soon we got to see the bird, a junco holding very still. She laid four eggs, greenish with brown spots in a sort of wreath around the large end. We stopped using that front door and went in and out through our summer kitchen. This was July, more than twenty-five years ago. Maybe some descendants still stay around here winter and summer, like us. Or maybe we are their north country breeding grounds and they migrate down to balmy Sheffield for the winter.

In his day, Edward Howe Forbush, our state ornithologist, knew these birds as slate-colored juncos. In August of 1926 he wrote of taking “a group of camp boys” along the Tuckerman Ravine trail up Mount Washington in New Hampshire. There were still several acres of “snowfields” just below the headwall of Tuckerman’s and the group saw juncos there. At the

top of Mount Washington, two-thousand feet above tree line, there used to be a hotel. These hikers saw a little bird on its ridgepole, “greeting us with its cheery Junco song.” Forbush wrote that this “was the only bird which is regularly found in summer in this barren place.” He and other writers described the bird as “leaden skies above, snow below.” The head, neck, and back are dark, the belly snowy white, as are the feathers on both sides of the tail. Describing the female, Forbush says she is “rufescent-broccoli-brown” on her upper parts, with her sides “more or less tinged light vinaceous-cinnamon.”

He describes that cheery song as a trill, and “a faint, whispering warble” as well as various chirps and a characteristic “smacking” or “snapping” note and a “clink” like the sound of two coins or pebbles struck together sharply.

Juncos are ground birds much of the time. The youngsters develop long strong toes and can run fast before they can fly. They scratch on the ground for food, the way chickens do, taking two scratching hops backwards, uncovering all sorts of tidbits. In winter they go around on top of the snow, finding the little seeds that have sprinkled down. Thoreau described this in his Journal, December 1, 1863. “A hundred kinds of indigenous grain are harvested now, broadcast upon the surface of the snow. Thus, at a critical season the seeds are shaken down onto a clean white napkin, unmixed with dirt and rubbish, and off this the little pensioners pick them. Their clean table is thus spread a few inches or feet above the ground.”

That day Henry Thoreau finished his journal entry in this puzzling way. “Will wonder become extinct in me? Shall I become insensible as a fungus?”

I can’t believe he entertained either of these notions. His wonder is not yet and never will be extinct. Also, what is so insensible about a fungus? How should Thoreau, of all people, be considering this. Thanks to him and to Forbush and to our own remarkable human ability to observe and appreciate, any of us can know the energy of both the junco and the fungus. Both are our neighbors, our family in this web of life. — Bonner McAllester