

The Real Snowbirds

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image from www.massaudubon.org

Winter is coming and many human “snowbirds” are fleeing the cold by heading south. Unlike their human counterparts, dark-eyed juncos, also known as snowbirds, accompany the arrival of winter. Their scientific species name, *hyemalis*, literally means “of the winter”. They tend to travel in small flocks, often returning to the same wintering area each year. These birds are commonly seen looking for seeds at the base of bird feeders or under shrubs at the edge of forests. In summer, juncos head north to breed and switch their diet to insects. In some high elevation areas, such as the Appalachians, dark-eyed juncos do not migrate, but stay in the same area year-round.

Juncos are sparrows, 5-6½ inches in length with a wingspan of 9¼ inches. The eastern variety, the slate-colored junco, is gray to dark gray above and white below. The bill is light pink. The females tend to be a bit smaller and are slightly browner than males. According to the Cornell Lab of Ornithology, “The Dark-eyed Junco is one of the most common birds in North America and can be found across the continent, from Alaska to Mexico, from California to New York. A recent estimate set the juncos’ total population at approximately 630 million individuals.”

Like other sparrows, they are vocal while defending territories, foraging, and roosting. When you are outside in the snow, listen and watch for these little winter wonders. You’ll be glad you stayed put for the winter.