

Birds of winter have arrived and will be around until spring: www.heraldtimesonline.com

By Dawn Hewitt
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If you feed birds, you've probably noticed the return of dark-eyed juncos, colloquially called snow birds. They're back, and will stick around through April.

Juncos are in the sparrow family, and are one of the most common and familiar songbirds in North America.

A 1995 census estimated that there are 650 million dark-eyed juncos in North America.

Juncos breed across southern and central Canada into Alaska, from the Rocky Mountains and west in the U.S., and in the Appalachians; they winter across the United States — except southern Florida — and into northern Mexico, according to Birds of North America Online, a publication of Cornell Lab of Ornithology.

The junco chapter of that online bird encyclopedia was written by the late Indiana University law and biology professor Val Nolan, IU biology professor Ellen Ketterson, and several of their grad students, now alumni.

In some areas of the country, juncos look quite different from slate-colored ones that visit Indiana in winter, although they all have a white belly, white outer tail feathers, dark eyes and a pinkish bill.

Oregon juncos, found in the Rocky Mountains and farther west, are the same species as ours, but have a dark black hood and brownish sides. Sometimes Oregon juncos show up in Indiana in winter, but not often.

Gray-headed juncos, found in the Four Corners area, are uniformly gray, like "ours," but with a bright rufous area on the back.

Juvenile slate-colored juncos are brownish, and some adult females can be, too. Some can even be so colorful as to resemble Oregon juncos. But they are the same species, after all.

A separate species, yellow-eyed junco, lives primarily in Mexico, but can be found in southern Arizona.

Nolan and Ketterson found that east of the Mississippi River, female juncos tend to migrate farther south than males, and adults farther than hatching-year birds. They found that in Michigan, just 20 percent of the juncos were female, while in Alabama, 72 percent were.

They also found that female juncos move south before males, and adult females before young females.

Juncos eat seeds, insects and spiders, and sometimes fruit and waste grain in agricultural fields, and researchers have found a strong social dominance structure, based on size, while juncos forage: Males dominate females, and adults dominate young.

In winter, they sleep in conifers and cedars, becoming active shortly before sunrise. Juncos quit feeding and roost later on cold and/or snowy days, Ketterson and Nolan found.

Are the adult juncos in our yards this year the same ones who spent the winter with us last year? The IU ornithologists found that junco loyalty to wintering sites is 20 percent at best, but juncos who return to the same wintering spot once have a 50 percent chance of returning to that location in subsequent years.

Contact birding columnist Dawn Hewitt at 812-331-4377 or dhewitt@heraldt.com.

Christmas Bird Counts

Mark your calendar now for upcoming Christmas Bird counts.

Dec. 14: Goose Pond. Contact Lee Sterrenburg at sterren@indiana.edu.

Dec. 17: Lake Monroe. Contact Jim or Susan Hengeveld at jhengeve@indiana.edu or shengeve@indiana.edu.

Dec. 18: Spring Mill State Park. Contact John Castrale at jcastrale@dnr.in.gov.

Dec. 20: Patoka Lake. Contact John Castrale.

Dec. 31: McCormick's Creek State Park. Contact Jeff Belth at 812-825-8353 or at jeffrebelth@aol.com.

Jan. 1, 2012: Muscatatuck National Wildlife Refuge. Contact Donna Stanley at 812-522-4352 or at donna_stanley@fws.gov.

IU doctoral student Jonathan Atwell releases a dark eyed Junco after measuring it in this 2009 picture.
Jeremy Hogan | Herald-Times

