# Slate-colored Junco

*Drs. Foster & Smith Educational Staff*

Thought to be a harbinger of winter, juncos are known to many as "snowbirds." In truth, their coloring often mimics a winter scene with its dark gray above and snow white below. Until recently, the Slate-colored Junco was considered to be the northern and eastern form of junco. Now, juncos are treated as one single species.

Junco bodies are shaped much like a sparrows body. They are found around feeders by nature, and will occasionally venture into hanging feeders for brief periods before quickly returning to the ground. A ground platform feeder may be your best way to attract them.

## Interesting Facts:

**Family:** Emberizidae

**Scientific Name:** *Junco hyemalis*

**Location:** Juncos breed from Alaska to Newfoundland and as far south as Mexico and Georgia. Their winter range includes the Gulf states and northern Mexico. They prefer to live on the edge of coniferous and deciduous woodlands, open areas, and bogs.

**Migration:** Spring migration occurs in early April as juncos fly over much of the eastern and midwestern states on their journey north to Alaska and Canada. Males will usually arrive early to establish territory for their nests. During fall these small birds will start flying south and will inhabit much of the United States and northern Mexico in wintering flocks.

**Nesting:** Juncos usually build their nests on the ground, in shallow depressions with overhead protection (such as the roots of moss covered trees). Females construct a nest that is generally made up of moss, grasses, rootlets, twigs, and lined with soft materials. Males will not help with the actual building, but may help carry in nesting materials. Females will lay 3-6 pale bluish or greenish eggs, with splotches that concentrate into a wreath at the large end. Juncos generally have 2, sometimes 3 broods per year. Eggs are incubated 11-13 days and nestlings are able to leave the nest in about 12 days.



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| **Diet:** | Much of their diet consists of a variety of seeds including weed and grass seeds. They also devour insects including caterpillars, ants, and spiders. Their young are feed a diet consisting completely of insects. |
| **Size and Color:** | The Slate-colored Junco is 5-1/2" to 6-1/4" long. A sparrow-shaped bird, the male has a dark gray or blackish hood and upper body, while the females are a bit duller in color. Both have white outer tail feathers and white bellies. |
| **Song:** | Musical, similar to a Chipping Sparrow's. A light *smack* or sharp *tik* with twittering tones. |
| **Special Characteristics:** | • Breeding pairs generally inhabit a territory of 2 to 3 acres, with males arriving at the breeding ground well in advance of females. Males secure dominion by singing from the tallest tree in the territory.<br>• Rapid development of foot muscles allow nestlings (who are unable to fly) to run from their nest if threatened.<br>• These gregarious birds travel in flocks of 10-30 and are seen most often at winter feeders. |
| **Attracting:** | Juncos are fond of millet, cracked corn, and hulled sunflower seeds. They prefer the habitat of forest edges and glades and are often seen in wooded suburban areas. These delightful birds can be like little chickens scratching through your yard and will often clean up seed thrown out of your feeders by fusier birds, such as nuthatches. They will also eat from ground feeders or from seed that is scattered on the ground. |
| **Life Span:** | 3 to 11 years. |

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