

THE VILLAGE BIRDING LIFE

“Return of the Dark-eyed Juncos”

by HSV Audubon

No, we're not talking about a Halloween zombie movie! However, as a general rule of thumb, Halloween is the time that we see the return of the Village birds that winter here.

The most common of these is the Dark-eyed Junco. In fact, Juncos, which are in the sparrow family, are one of the most common of all forest birds. Like many sparrows, they like brushy, thick cover. If you have a seed feeders that are not too far out in the open you almost certainly will have Juncos feeding on the ground below them. As with most seedeaters, Juncos will not pass up an opportunity for a juicy bug.

Our Juncos are grayish on top and white on their belly. The males are distinctly gray while the females have some brown mixed in. They have a light colored, sometimes pinkish bill. The longish, white flanked tail is a good identification marker when a bird takes off in flight. Winter Juncos are gregarious and most often seen in a group.

Depending on the time of the year Dark-eyed Juncos range from Alaska to northern Mexico and every state but Hawaii. There are regional color variations. The color pattern of our Village Juncos places them in the “slate-colored” group. Juncos in the western parts of the country may have a distinct rust color on their backs (Oregon Juncos) or bolder white marking on their wings (White-winged Juncos).

It comes as a bit of a surprise to the casual birder that Juncos are a sparrow. Juncos are not hard to identify compared to many other sparrows. Often birders jokingly describe an unidentified sparrow as a “LBJ”- little brown job. And indeed, many of the LBJs, such as, the white-throated, song and field sparrows are also returning now to the Village but more on this at another time.

There is another returning Village bird in the sparrow family that is easy to identify, that is if you can find them, and that looks nothing like a LBJ. In many ways, the Eastern Towhee is the opposite of a Junco. Not only are they less common in the Village but it's odd to find towhees in large groups. They may come to feeders but are most at home in the middle of a briar patch or other dense cover. Learning their song is the easiest way to locate them. (We've mentioned before that if you web search “bird songs” you'll find a couple of good sites where you can hear almost any bird song.) Towhees are moderately larger than Juncos and more richly colored. One bird guide describes them as “bold black and warm reddish brown”.

HSV is on the western edge of the Eastern Towhee range. They range slightly into Canada but for the most part are limited to the eastern U.S. A closely related western cousin, the Spotted Towhee, is occasionally sighted in Arkansas but rarely seen in the Village.

As always HSVBIRDS.ORG has a lot of information about everything you'd like to know about birds. You will see on the website that HSV Audubon has available a Village birding checklist. It lists the over 200 species of birds that might be seen in the Village, when they might be seen and how common they are. It's a great way to keep track of the birds at your feeder. Guests are always welcome at our 10:00 a.m., second Friday of the month meetings at the Coronado Center

Photos by Vic Prislipsky