



## Dark-eyed Junco

### Coloring instructions:

Pinkish yellow - the bill

Black - the head, eye, and breast

Brown - the back, wings, inner tail feathers, legs, and feet

White - the belly and outer tail feathers

# Dark-eyed Junco

**Length:** 5  $\frac{1}{2}$ "

**Habitat:** Common winter bird in woodlands and hedgerows

**Field marks:** Small sparrow with black head and throat. White edges on tail are seen as junco flies away.

Dark-eyed Juncos are most common in the winter. They are one of the many bird species that move into the Sacramento River Valley to spend the winter and then leave in early spring to move both north and up into higher elevations. Juncos form small flocks of 10 to 30 birds during the winter. These winter flocks each have their own territory. Each flock might separate into smaller flocks during the day but they all stay within their flock's territory. The flocks even tend to follow the same route around their territory from day to day.

If you see a flock flying away from you, you will see the field mark of white outer tail feathers. This flashing field mark helps keep the flock together. Stragglers can easily see the rest of the flock up ahead.

Each flock has a **dominance hierarchy**, which is also called a **pecking order**. If one junco gets too close to another junco, that junco will display to the other and drive it away. Watch for a junco facing

another junco and raising and lowering its head or raising and fanning out its tail and wings or rushing toward the other bird, even pecking it if the other bird does not back off. The bird that drives away the other one is dominant.

All the birds within the winter flock have a ranking within this hierarchy. For example, the fourth bird in the hierarchy would back away from the three birds at the top of the hierarchy but could dominate and drive back all the other birds within the flock. This dominance hierarchy keeps the birds within a flock evenly spread out as they feed on seeds on the ground.

Many species have dominance hierarchies. In almost all of them, the males dominate the females and older birds dominate the younger birds. Dominant birds often get the best nesting territories and the greatest access to feeders. However, dominant birds must spend more time and energy defending their status. In many species, dominance does not seem to influence success in mating. The hierarchy helps spread the birds out into various parts of the habitat but birds within the hierarchy have equal chances of successfully raising babies.

# Dark-eyed Junco Challenges

Put a check mark in the box when you have completed the challenge.

- Identify a Dark-eyed Junco. The males tend to have darker heads.
- See the white outer tail feathers of a junco flying away from you.
- Observe dominance displays within a flock. Notice how dominance displays keep the juncos spread out as they forage on the ground.
- Notice variations in plumages within a flock. This is most easily studied at a feeder. Juncos have a greater diversity in plumage than do most species.
- See a flock fly into dense cover to roost through the long winter night.

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