

Welcome Back:

The cheeriest critter on the planet began arriving last week. I like to flatter myself that they followed me back from my trip to the north woods, up around Hayward, WI. I suspect they would have found our little corner of the world anyway, without my influence. They do every year. We humans (at least this one) like to imagine that we count for more than we do, when it comes to nature and our influence on events. As individuals we are just another speck in the biosphere, about as significant as a dogwood, biologically speaking. But that's not what I was talking about.

I was speaking of the happiest of all birds, the noble Junco Hyemalis, the Dark-eyed Junco. I use the word 'noble' not because of their size, about the same as a sparrow, and not because they are endangered. They are as common as pocket change. I say 'noble' because of the service they provide when the wind is howling and the snow is deep. Dark on top and light underneath, they arrive here in the fall and begin moving into the thickets and brush piles all over the neighborhood.

Juncos like it cold. They go as far as the Arctic Circle to breed and head back here only when the days are quickly shortening, when the specter of a nightly frost is upon us. They are comfortable here in the dead of winter when Homo sapiens is piling on the woolens and fleece. And therein lies their nobility. They are the happiest little things during the harshest of months. They will induce a smile to overcome even the most deeply set winter scowl. They are extremely social, even for birds, always in a pack and constantly talking. The colder it gets the more they chatter. And what a delightful chatter it is, somewhere between a burble and a twitter. They chat as if they were in a Disney feature, unreasonably happy and always on key.

They are basically fearless, except for their attention to the smaller local hawks, which are all too adept at abruptly ending a songbird's tune. They are comfortable with humans and all manner of four legged creatures. I have often stood in the middle of a batch of Juncos while they deftly picked seeds from the snow. All the while that lovely babbling keeps up its pace.

And then there's the Junco jump. The little clowns hop rapidly back and forth scratching away at the surface of the snow looking for the tiny meals they know to be buried in there. It's hilarious, a little like double-dutch jump rope but at ten times the speed. And they approach the task with the focus of a high school junior taking her SAT's. I'm sure that they don't think it's funny, scratching out a meal at twenty below zero but I'm glad they do the jump, nonetheless.

They begin their day with the earliest of the foragers, the cardinals, and are among the last to roost at night. They launch from and return to large brush piles which we have built relatively close to the feeders. The piles provide emergency shelter when the sharp shinned hawk flashes through and also act as the busiest apartment complex imaginable. I would bet that the temperature inside the brush pile is a good thirty degrees higher than the air temp simply by force of all those little bodies. Hundreds of birds stacked beside, on top and all around each other, chatting away about the comings and goings of their myriad neighbors. The din could actually be described as noise if it weren't so pretty. What a treat. I have actually found myself chuckling out loud in the middle of a December day, sitting on our front stairs, soaking up the joyful noise that these remarkable birds put forth.

So do yourself a favor if you haven't already. Spread some corn or seed on the ground; they prefer grazing to perching. See if you can get yourself a yard full of winter cheer and don't forget to listen. I guarantee you an extra smile or two when the days are darkest.