

HeraldTimesOnline.com

Birding

Dark-eyed juncos star in new documentary film

By Dawn Hewitt
December 9, 2012

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Juncos — snowbirds, as some folks call them — are the subject of a new documentary, made right here at Indiana University, a global hot spot for research on juncos.

Dark-eyed juncos occur across North America, from northern Alaska south to Guatemala, although for much of that range, including Indiana, the birds are winter residents only.

The first time I saw a junco in the West, I didn't recognize it. Indiana juncos are uniformly gray or gray-brown, with a white belly. The junco I saw in Colorado had a black hood and had orange-brown under its wings and an orange-brown back. The bird looked so different from my backyard juncos that I didn't know where to find it in my field guide.

The juncos I saw in Colorado are called Oregon juncos. They're the same species as Indiana's slate-colored junco, but a different subspecies. Technically, they're both dark-eyed juncos. There are also pink-sided juncos in the Rocky Mountains; white-winged juncos in parts of Colorado and Wyoming; gray-headed in the mountains and deserts of the Southwest, and red-backed juncos along the Mexican border. They're all dark-eyed juncos. There's some debate about whether the Guadalupe junco is yet another subspecies of dark-eyed junco, or a separate species.

Variation within a species is evolution in action, and that's part of what the movie documents. The movie is 88 minutes long, but modular, with segments from two to 20 minutes long—focusing on numerous topics of junco research, including behavior, genetics and ecology.

The target audience for the movie is high school and college students or anyone interested in natural science. Videos and corresponding teaching materials and links to research articles and related content will be available on the Web in January.

The film was written, produced and directed primarily by IU biology professor Ellen Ketterson and postdoctoral fellow Jonathan Atwell and Steve Burns, a filmmaker with Indiana University's department of telecommunications.

It was funded by the National Science Foundation and IU's Office of the Vice Provost for Research, biology and telecom departments, College of Arts and Sciences Themester program, and the Center for the Integrative Study of Animal Behavior.

The film also documents Atwell's most recent research, on how juncos adapt to urban environments.

Juncos living in San Diego, Calif., showed persistently lower steroid levels when stressed and willingness to more boldly explore novel situations compared with juncos living nearby in forested areas — the species' ancestral habitat.

Urban juncos and rural juncos behave differently in many ways, and through the generations, their genetics are diverging, Atwell and his colleagues discovered.

As you enjoy those little gray and white birds that forage on the ground beneath your bird feeders, realize that they are important “guinea pigs” for ecological researchers, revealing fascinating new insights on the ordinary, extraordinary nature of nature.

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

If you go

“Ordinary Extraordinary Junco” premieres at 6:30 p.m. Tuesday at IU Cinema, on the north side of the IU Auditorium. Admission to the 88-minute movie is free.

Watch the movie's trailer at www.juncoproject.org.

Christmas bird counts coming up

Birders of all skill levels are welcome to participate in the thousands of Christmas Bird Counts that will be conducted between Dec. 15 and Jan. 5 across North America. More eyes in the field means more birds found. Beginning birders are welcome.

Dec. 15: Lake Monroe CBC. For more information and to sign up, contact Jim or Susan Hengeveld, at jhengeve@indiana.edu or shengeve@indiana.edu or at 812-988-1671.

Dec. 16: Brown County State Park CBC. Meet at the Nature Center in the park at 8 a.m. and break for lunch at noon. Return to the nature center at 3 p.m. for the tally. For information, contact Jim Eagleman at 812-988-5240 or jeagleman@dnr.IN.gov.

Dec. 16: Spring Mill State Park CBC. Contact John Castrale at jcastrale@dnr.in.gov.



Dark-eyed juncos visit Indiana during the winter months. The birds nest much farther north. The juncos that migrate through Indiana are usually this color form. Rich Janzaruk | Times-Mail



The bird on the left is a Oregon junco from the Mount Laguna area in California, and the bird on the right is an Oregon junco from the vicinity of University of California, San Diego. The birds are captive residents of the IU aviary. Jeremy Hogan | Herald-Times

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