

BOGDIVERSITY THURSDAY



—*from Head Naturalist Clinton*

Dark-eyed Junco

POST #53—December 22, 2022

For most folks, our featured species on this Bogdiversity Thursday is a wintering species. So much so, that a common colloquial name for this species is "snowbird." In our area, this species breeds and does frequently stay all year! Our featured species today is incredibly variable, widespread, and species that marks phenology for many: Dark-eyed Junco!

A wide-ranging species, Dark-eyed Juncos are found across North America, up to the tree line in boreal Canada and Alaska and down into the desert southwest! Dark-eyed Juncos are a species that breeds throughout the boreal forest and in Minnesota prefers lowland conifer forest, like what is found in the Sax-Zim Bog. The black spruce, tamarack, and white cedar forests of Northeastern and North Central Minnesota constitute the heart of the range for this species in Minnesota.

It would be hard to talk about Dark-eyed Juncos without mentioning its subspecies! At present, there are at least 15 different subspecies of Dark-eyed Junco. When you think of

"junco" you are likely thinking of the subspecies that breeds in Minnesota, Slate-colored Junco (*Junco hyemalis hyemalis*). Minnesota also routinely sees Cassair (*J. h. cismontanus*) and Oregon Juncos (*J. h. oregonus*) during fall migration and the winter. The subspecies photographed below is Pink-sided Junco (*J. h. mearnsi*), which is found primarily in the west-central US.

Though fairly easy to ID by sight, Dark-eyed Juncos can be tricky to ID by sound! Their calls are very similar to other monotone sparrows in the area like Chipping Sparrow and Swamp Sparrow. However, speed and quality of the song can be helpful to separate these birds! Swamp Sparrows have a lower and slower song, with Chipping Sparrows having a higher and faster song. Dark-eyed Juncos in our area tend to have a song in between Swamp and Chipping Sparrows speeds, and a usually a little bit buzzy.

As noted, Dark-eyed Junco's are often referred to as "snowbirds." They often appear in the southern parts of Minnesota following the first snows... at least in theory! Dark-eyed Juncos make it to the southern parts of Minnesota towards the middle or end of September. In the winter, Dark-eyed Juncos can make their way as far south as Mexico, though the southern Great Plains is typical.

More information can be found with the photos below!

(Photos by Sparky Stensaas; Maps from Minnesota Breeding Bird Atlas)



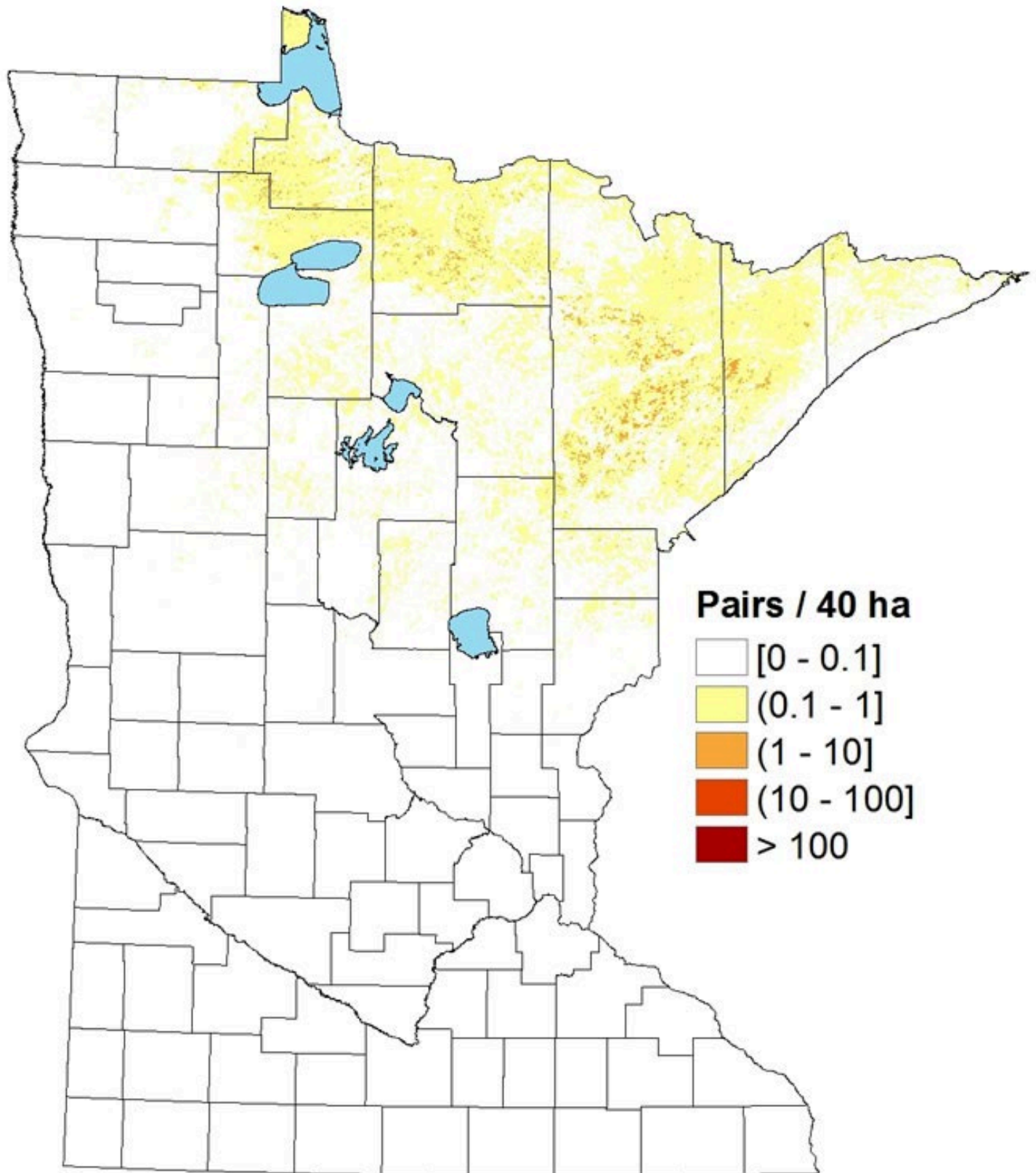
This is a male Dark-eyed Junco weathering some snow! In Northeastern Minnesota, juncos are fairly regular wintering species. Their antics below bird feeders are quite fun to watch and they can be quite territorial around food.



This Dark-eyed Junco was photographed in Churchill, Manitoba in the abundant stunted spruces. Their trilling, somewhat buzzy songs start filling the lowland conifers starting in late-April.



Female Dark-eyed Juncos are understated, but lovely! Their soft grays contrast strongly with the darker-slaty gray of males. Dark-eyed Juncos are ground nesting species, preferring to put their nests near roots, rocks, or tree trunks.



This map from the Minnesota Breeding Bird Atlas shows the density of breeding Dark-eyed Juncos. The greater Sax-Zim Bog shows good to high density for Minnesota! (Map from Minnesota Breeding Bird Atlas).



Pink-sided Junco (*J. h. mearnsi*) is a handsome bird! This species breeds in the western Great Plains to the Desert Southwest. This is one of the many variations in Dark-eyed Junco plumages.