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WINTERING WITH THE JUNCOS

by

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Outside of our study window at the Ghost Ranch in New Mexico are two very different kinds of juncos or snow birds. One has a black head, chest and neck with light under parts that mark the Oregon and Shufeldt juncos. The other has an ashy-gray head as if it had grown older with age, and a rufous back.

During the winter it is always a sporting game to create a cafeteria in a sheltered spot outside the window where bird seed, crumbs and other food bring in the winter residents. The juncos prefer seed. The gray-heads that nest and live in these southern mountains rule the tables, while the black-headed tourists that are the winter guests have to sneak in here and there and grab a few bites.

Sitting at the desk in front of the fireplace and clicking a typewriter to visit with distant friends gives one a merry time, but it is frequently delayed by the exciting game outside. The aspen tree beyond the porch seems ~~leafed~~ with juncos and there are four species, perhaps five, because eight are recorded in New Mexico. On the porch outside is an amusing banquet of twenty-three birds. It is like a three-tinged circus. One drops down from the tree. There is a flash and two flutter straight up in a contest for a seat at the table. One of the identification marks of a junco in flight is the spread of tail feathers showing the outer pure white ones. not clear

In the midst of this, two canyon towhees, almost twice the size of the juncos, appear and usurp the speakers' table. Instead of standing up, *to eat* they sit down and complacently take charge of the banquet. Most of the juncos subside to the observation tree, awaiting their turn. It is a peaceful scene.

All of a sudden there is a wild burst of wings in every direction. It seems to be set off by a tiny squeak from one or two guardsmen. Some dash under the Chamisa bushes and the small spruce trees. Others flare away under



the big boulders on the hillside. Two or three cling petrified to the beams under the porch. One squats in the corner, and a couple huddle under the chairs, all sitting for several minutes with frozen faces and staring eyes. We had noticed an <sup>act</sup> of this kind three times during the past week.

A few minutes later we discovered a sharp-shinned hawk on the lower limb of a cottonwood tree about a hundred yards away. As long as that predator <sup>sat</sup> was there, there was not a movement of a small bird anywhere in sight. They must have a fine ventriloquial warning note that vibrates to all of the companions and sends the wings beating for safety. It was not until five minutes after the discomfited hawk had sailed off toward the chimney peaks a mile away that the "All's-well" note was sounded and the juncos came to life.

Far south from our Oregon home, one might expect a warmer climate. Yet it is colder here than along the Willamette, since the altitude is 6400 feet. This season snow has been more frequent than in Portland, so our winter food supply has been a "Grandma's Kitchen" for the feathered breadline.

When the summer plays <sup>out</sup> and the fall weather arrives, some residents that live in the north have a habit of moving south. If they are human dwellers, it is perhaps more from a health and recreation standpoint. But many varieties of birds have a different motive. It is not so much climate and health to them as the necessary search for food. Some get a living around ponds, lakes and rivers. Others like seeds or insects from the soil. All are deprived of dinner when the top soil freezes and the snow falls. The fading out of insect life affects many song birds that are insectivorous, so they gradually gather in flocks and start on the long trek. It is the numerous seed plants in New Mexico that are an attraction to many species.

The change from the sea level of Oregon to the high mountainous plateau of this state shows a tremendous difference in all forms of nature. The big picturesque rivers are supplanted by dwindling streams and dry washes. This is the land of little rain. Forests blanket the mountainous areas of the north, while here they are only a thin patchy covering for the dry red hills. The mountains here are ripped and torn by erosion and yet there is a charm



Ghost Ranch  
Abiquiu, New Mexico



in the metallic red, blue and gold colors.

A bird lover from Oregon or a member of the Audubon Society who likes bird walks through the woods would find such a difference in varieties in this ancient Indian country. The canyon towhee that drops in for lunch outside our study windows several times a day is not at all like the Oregon towhee. He is plain grayish-brown with a light rufous cap on his head. The throat is buffy and finely spotted. Another visitor that is well known in Oregon is the Gambel or white-crowned sparrow. A more interesting and rarer species is the Townsend solitaire which we saw only once during the winter time in our orchard at Jennings Lodge. He nests from the east central part of Alaska south along the Cascades and Sierra Nevadas, also through the Rocky Mountains to New Mexico. This is his winter range. We see two or three every day, but never the male and female together like the towhees. They are solitary birds with a single eerie call across the canyons at this time of the year. As a breeder, this ~~bird~~ <sup>bird</sup> is rare in New Mexico and found only on the highest peaks.

For companionship, there is a marked difference between the solitaire and the junco. The latter is always in flocks and the different species are chummy. They are more abundant than any other birds around the Ghost Ranch. As we wander over the wide llanos, we meet the flocks of pipits and horned larks. Then along the ridges among the stunted pines and junipers we often come upon a wandering flock of pinon jays. They straggle under the nut pines and oaks and we listen to their cheery mewing calls. They are so different from the other two species that we occasionally see, the long-crested and the Woodhouse jay. These last two are more solitary.

Glancing out of the window one snowy day, we saw seven chestnut-backed bluebirds that had come in near our adobe cottage to see what the juncos had for lunch. One took a taste of crumbs, but he preferred insects and vegetable food. They scattered among the apricot and peach trees, dropping in the grass to hunt. Two other birds that we saw in the orchard were the gray titmouse and the Rocky Mountain nuthatch. The gray titmouse of New Mexico is more like the resident of Portland that never travels <sup>very far</sup> in summer or winter. His migration is about as restricted as any bird in New Mexico, as he just wanders about.