Wild Bird Habitat Store

October Newsletter - 2026

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Fall Bird Migration is underway.
Why and how do birds migrate?
Find Out inside

October Bird Notes:

- Northern birds will begin to arrive for the winter in October
- Most all our summer neo-tropical birds are gone till next spring.
- Flocks of blackbirds are gathering and starting to move south.
- The last of the songbirds from our north will be passing through.
- Ducks and geese, the last migrants to head south, are becoming restless.
- The molt is complete, feathers are fresh, and birds will return to the feeders.
- Now is the time to consider water for winter. Check your bird bath heater.
- Birds are preparing their winter food sources so keep the feeders filled.
- Watch your yards for new or unusual birds passing through.
- Migration is a time when extremely rare birds may suddenly appear in your area.
- Take the time for an early morning bird walk and watch the migration take place.

HELP EXPAND LINCOLN'S WILDERNESS PARK
It's for the birds

WILDERNESS WEDNESDAYS - Every Wednesday in October the Wild Bird Habitat Stores will donate 11% of our total sales to help fund the expansion of Lincoln's historic Wilderness Park, a 15 mile long lineal wilderness area along Salt Creek. This rich biodiverse area supports over 400 native plant species and 250 species of birds, along with a variety of terrestrial and aquatic animals, pollinators and many other beneficial insects. The expansion will add 50 acres to the current heavily wooded riparian woodland, traditional oak savannahs, and prairie areas along with extending the 30 miles of trails that wind through the park. This is not just a win for the city of Lincoln where people of all ages can experience nature first hand, but it will also provide additional habitat for birds at a time when their populations face steep declines from the loss of habitats. So shop on Wednesdays in October to help fund the expansion of one of Lincoln's most valuable natural resources. For more information about Wilderness Park, or to make a donation for this expansion of Wilderness Park, visit **friendsofwildernesspark.org**





Dark-eyed Junco

By the time winter arrives, many birdwatchers have already noticed a familiar visitor beneath their feeders - the Dark-eyed Junco. Referred to as the "snowbird" often preceding the first snowfalls, the junco is one of North America's most widespread and familiar sparrows, and one of Nebraska's most familiar winter visitors. Although it may seem like an ordinary little gray bird hopping through the leaves, the Dark-eyed Junco has a fascinating life history that includes long-distance travels, elaborate courtship, ground nesting, and surprisingly complex social behavior.

Juncos begin showing up across Nebraska as fall migration gets underway. Although most Nebraska juncos are winter visitors, the story is more complicated than it first appears. Nebraska is home to several different forms of Dark-eyed Junco, and one form, the White-wing Junco, that has a small breeding population in the Pine Ridge.

WINGTIP: Juncos breed in forests, particularly coniferous and mixed forests, in Alaska and Canada, and can occur from near sea level to elevations exceeding 11,000 feet. During the breeding season, they tend to stay in woodland habitats with plenty of understory vegetation. As winter approaches juncos generally migrate into the United States where their habitat choices become much broader.

For such a familiar little backyard bird, Nebraska's Dark-eyed Juncos have an impressive story - one that includes the long-distance migration of several distinctive forms of juncos.

The most common form, the Slate-colored Junco, is an abundant migrant and winter visitor throughout Nebraska. Fall arrivals generally begin in mid-September, with birds becoming more widespread as late September cold fronts move through. October is typically the important month for junco migration into our area.

During winter, juncos can be found virtually statewide. One of the most interesting things about Nebraska's juncos is that they don't all look alike. There is a variety of Dark-eyed Juncos

- **Slate-colored Junco** - by far the most numerous form statewide.
- **Oregon Junco** - common in western Nebraska, less common toward the east.
- **Pink-sided Junco** - particularly associated with western Nebraska.
- **Cassiar Junco** - a regular migrant and winter visitor that can occur statewide.
- **White-winged Junco** - a rare regular resident of the Pine Ridge.
- **Gray-headed Junco** - a rare, casual winter visitor.



Slate-colored Junco

These variations make Nebraska a particularly interesting place to study Dark-eyed Juncos.

Juncos are also a good reminder that bird migration is not always an all-or-nothing phenomenon. Some juncos migrate thousands of miles, others move only short distances, and some remain in the same region year-round.

For those of us who watch birds in our yards, the little gray birds hopping beneath the feeders are more than just winter visitors. They are part of a much larger North American story involving migration, and survival with Nebraska as an important part of that story, serving as a winter home and migration stop-over for large numbers of juncos.

WINGTIP: For many people in the central and eastern United States, the arrival of juncos in autumn is one of the familiar signs that winter is approaching.

Juncos may seem like ordinary little sparrows as they hop beneath bird feeders searching for fallen seeds, but their annual journey is surprisingly interesting.

One of the most interesting changes in junco behavior occurs during winter. During the breeding season, males can be highly territorial but, in winter, juncos often gather into flocks. These flocks may contain numerous individuals, and where different geographic forms overlap, several types of juncos may be found together. These flocks of juncos provide safety in numbers and make it easier for birds to locate food. Juncos may also associate with other native sparrows and small songbirds while foraging. This can make for some interesting bird watching.

WINGTIP: The junco's winter flocking behavior makes them particularly easy to observe in backyards. Look beneath feeders, along brush piles, and around shrubs where fallen seeds accumulate.

Juncos are primarily ground-foraging birds. Rather than spending time high in trees, they hop across the ground beneath shrubs, trees, and under bird feeders searching through leaves and loose soil for food. Their feeding behavior is distinctive. Rather than walking like a robin, a junco typically moves by making quick hops. A junco will often hop forward, pause, and then scratch backwards through leaf litter or vegetation to uncover food. When startled, the flock may suddenly disappear into nearby shrubs, with the birds' white outer tail feathers flashing as they fly.

WINGTIP: Ground feeders with perforated bottoms are designed to sit on the ground. These make excellent feeders for juncos as well as other ground foraging native sparrows and Mourning Doves. Recommended bird seed is white Proso millet and Nutra safflower. A quality general wild bird mix works well, but the birds may have to share the sunflower seed in it with squirrels.

75% of a junco's diet consists of seeds. Common foods include seeds from weeds and grasses, as well as seeds found beneath bird feeders. During the breeding season, insects become much more important. Juncos eat beetles, moths, caterpillars, ants, wasps, flies and other small insects feeding their rapidly growing young offspring.

At backyard feeders, juncos often prefer to feed on the ground beneath elevated feeders. They will land on platform bird feeders, especially if snow is covering the ground. They readily eat white Proso millet and other small seeds that fall from feeders.

WINGTIP: Juncos will often return to an area where they were successful in finding food the previous winter. This includes backyards where well stocked bird feeders are located.

As winter gives way to spring, the behavior of juncos changes dramatically. By mid-April they are on their way back north where the males will establish and defend a territory. The female will construct a nest tucked into a depression on a slope, beneath vegetation, beside a rock, or among the roots of an overturned tree. Her small, cupped nest will be made from grasses, moss, leaves, rootlets, and other plant material then lined with finer grasses or hair. A clutch of three to six pale eggs marked with brown, gray, or greenish spotting will be laid hatching in 12 to 13 days.

The nestlings grow quickly. They generally remain in the nest for about 10 to 13 days before fledging. But leaving the nest doesn't mean the young juncos are immediately independent. Like many songbirds, young juncos still depend on their parents for food and protection for a period after fledging.

Young birds gradually develop their adult plumage. Juveniles are much more heavily streaked than adults, but they already show one of the junco's distinctive characteristics, the white outer tail feathers. Juncos can raise more than one brood during a breeding season, with some producing as many as three broods under favorable conditions. But as the summer progresses, family groups eventually disperse and the birds prepare for another seasonal movement south ahead of winter.

So, the next time a flock of "snowbirds" appears beneath your feeder, take a moment to watch them. Their quiet hopping, flashing tails and subtle differences in plumage are clues to a fascinating life that extends far beyond Nebraska and our backyards.



Oregon Junco

That's why we suggest that this winter you look closely at these "snowbirds" feeding and visiting your backyard. Take a few minutes to look carefully at the birds. These Dark-eyed Juncos are sometimes overlooked because they are so common in winter, Yet Nebraska provides an excellent opportunity to appreciate just how fascinating this species can be. There is the abundant Slate-colored Junco with a blackish back and pale white belly that winters across the state. The Oregon Junco with a darker hood and contrasting brownish back, and the Pink-sided Junco with warm pinkish or cinnamon-colored flanks, both more common to western Nebraska. You just never know which other form of junco may venture in. It just might be the Cassiar Junco paying you a visit.



Cassiar Junco

And if you're headed to far western Nebraska, then watch for the White-winged Junco that nests in the Pine Ridge region. Unlike the juncos that most Nebraskans see in winter, White-winged Juncos breed in the Pine Ridge of northwestern Nebraska. Their Nebraska breeding range is relatively small, and is associated with the western Pine Ridge and its canyons.

So, if you're a Nebraska birdwatcher who ventures out during the winter months, watch for juncos near brush piles and shrubs, along woodland edges, in sheltered ravines, parks and cemeteries, and in weedy fields and areas with abundant seeds. And consider this: The juncos we see in winter may have traveled considerable distances to spend the cold months here and Nebraska hosts a remarkable variety of these little sparrows. Those ordinary-looking little gray birds called juncos have a much more interesting story than you think.



Slate-colored Junco

WINGTIP: Juncos, as with all native sparrows, have a distinctive feeding habit. They hop and scratch with their feet to turn up seeds. This is unlike the common house sparrow, which is not a true sparrow but a weaver finch, that uses its bill to sweep the ground in search of seeds. So, if you see a little brown bird hopping and scratching as they forage, take the time to identify this bird as it is a junco or another native sparrow.

ABOUT BIRD MIGRATION

Bird Migration

One of the most amazing phenomena, if not the most amazing of all in the wildlife kingdom, is the migration of birds. Bird migration has fascinated humans since the beginning of history. It is not only mentioned in the bible, but was studied by ancient philosophers. While many questions have been answered, many other questions remain.



Why Do Some Birds Migrate?

We know for certain birds migrate not because of cold weather itself, but because of the impact cold weather has on a bird's food resources. If they feed strictly on insects, fruits, or rodents, chances are they will need to move to a moderate or warmer climate to find the food they need in order to survive. In respect to ground foraging birds, the Juncos which feed on seeds, they will need to relocate to an area where heavy winter snows will not cover their food resources beyond their ability to reach them for an extended period of time. So we know for certain that bird migration is driven by the availability of food. Temperatures alone won't make most birds migrate. In fact many exotic birds could survive outside in temperatures well below zero if they had enough food.

How Do Birds Know When Migrate?

Well, we know that birds migrate quite punctually every year when the season is changing. And what is the most unmistakable clue to the fact that the season is changing? The length of the day! It is believed that birds can tell when the days get shorter in late summer and longer in the spring. It is believed that shorter daylight hours striking the brain through a thinning area on the top of the skull is what triggers this "alarm clock" in the fall. That combined with cooler weather and reduced food supplies tells migratory birds its time to go.



In the spring the amount of available light resets their clock. Only in this case, it's migration northward. Certain glands in the bird begin to secrete chemicals that have to do with breeding. The bird feels the need to breed and heads north where it will be summer. So the change in the length of days and the disappearance of food tell the bird to head to warmer places. And the breeding instinct in the spring tells them to head north. There are many other factors involved, of course, and many things we still don't understand, but these are certainly among the chief clues to bird migration.

How Do Birds Migrate?

Could you image traveling across two complete continents without a road map, and reaching your point of destination with pinpoint accuracy? The Arctic Tern, North Americas' longest migrant, does just that. A 12,000 mile trip one way from the Arctic to the Antarctic in the fall, then returning another 12,000 miles on a different route in the spring. Or a Rose-breasted Grosbeak that nested in your yard traveling to South America in the fall, only to return to your yard the following spring. And the Dark-eyed Juncos who wintered gathering seeds under your feeder, and the same Juncos showing up the following winter in the same yard. How do birds that migrate continue to follow the same routes generation after generation for thousands of years?

Migratory birds have several methods of navigation. Birds that migrate during the day, such as hawks, eagles, and vultures, use the position of the sun to find their way along with terrestrial landmarks. They also can use the setting sun as an indication of due west. Those which migrate at night use celestial navigation. They find their way by using the patterns of the stars. During a birds first year migration they memorize the position of the constellations in relation to the North Star. These star patterns stay the same even though the Earth moves through space, making the constellations appear to move to different spots in the sky during the year.

Birds also use magnetic fields to navigate by. They have tiny grains of a mineral called magnetite just above their nostrils. This mineral may help them to navigate using the Earth's magnetic field, which tells the bird what direction is true north.

How High Do Migrating Birds Fly?

The altitude at which migrating birds fly often depends on the winds, after all, it is more efficient to use wind energy. In the fall advancing cold fronts produce winds out of the north helping to propel migrating birds that are headed south for the winter. Just the opposite happens in the spring as warm winds are generated from the south. Some ducks and geese fly at remarkable heights with some geese reported flying as high as 29,000 feet, five miles up. Most songbirds that migrate at night fly between 2000 and 6000 feet, although they may fly higher to reach favorable winds.

Keep realtime track of the fall & spring migrations in your area at birdcast.org

Dave's October Bird Chatter



In the 40 years I've been feeding and attracting birds to our yard, this has been the most remarkable year for attracting hummingbirds. Generally, we have 2 or maybe 3 hummingbirds visiting the feeders throughout September, but this year since mid-August the hummingbirds have been as thick as flies.

We hung three nectar feeders this year, out of sight from each other, and the hummingbirds have been numerous at all three. We also have a huge honeysuckle bush covering a portion of our backyard fence and the hummers have spent a good deal of time there. Our pollinator garden is not just loaded with an additional supply of rich nectar plants, but plenty of small insects for the hummingbirds to feed on. And at the many bird friendly trees and shrubs we've planted we see hummingbirds gleaning insects. Along with the constant aerial battles among the hummers, its be great fun to watch them.

I'm not sure why this year there was such an abundance of hummingbirds passing through at the same time. I can only speculate. But one thing for certain - they will have moved on by early October, and we'll miss the excitement of watching them.

WINGTIP: Hummingbirds return to areas where the previous year they found plenty of nectar from plants and feeders, and a trove of insects to feed on.



White-throated Sparrow

Our summer birds have departed moving south as the seasons change. But now, as we move into October, we can look forward to the arrival of birds from the north that spend the winter months with us. Some of the first to arrive are the Dark-eyed Juncos and White-throated Sparrows. These two birds seem to be the first announcing the onset of the fall migration of northern bird species. Other birds to watch for that arrive from the north in October to spend the winter months in our area include Pine Siskins, Purple Finch, Harris' Sparrow, and the Red-breasted nuthatch. This little nuthatch, often a common winter visitor, is so tame it has become everyone's favorite seasonal bird. As we move closer to the month of November we may have crossbills, Red-polls, Snow Buntings and Brown Creepers along with any number of other birds from the North Country in search of winter food resources and coming to our bird feeders.

The ducks and geese are becoming restless for their flight to southern regions where open water will be abundant all winter long. They are among the last of the migratory birds to head south ahead of approaching cold weather. As with most birds, the trip south is relaxed and unhurried. Area lakes are a great place to view the many species of waterfowl and shorebirds on the move. By the time we see the Snow Geese overhead we know we have reached the end of the fall bird migration and winter will be setting in.

The huge flocks of blackbirds, including the boisterous Common Grackle, will be growing in numbers and eventually they will leave as well. The folks in the southern Gulf States where these birds are headed are already dreading their arrival. Many of these flocks, once they reach those southern states, can number in the millions where the noise and upheaval can be hard for us to imagine.

These large flocks of blackbirds passing overhead are truly a sign of autumn along with the changing colors of the leaves. But mind you, they don't all leave at the same time. Blackbirds from the north will continue to filter through our area for the next few weeks.

This is the time of year for big changes and even surprises. Watch your feeders and surrounding yard for new birds showing up or just passing through. October is the month when many warblers that summer in the Northern U.S. and Canada will be moving through. Vireos, thrushes, flycatchers, kinglets, and others will be drifting south to winter territories along with a number of native sparrows. Keep your field guide or smartphone bird ID APP and binoculars at the ready.

If you are just getting started feeding birds, you can be confident the staff at the Wild Bird Habitat Store will provide you with the information to become instantly successful. With 33 years of experience and knowledge of the latest techniques and products in the bird feeding industry, we are here to help you. Bird feeders, and other products, sold at Wild Bird Habitat with a warranty, are repaired right in our store if needed. Bird feeders without warranties are also repaired as needed at little or no cost as long as replacement parts are available. We will even repair feeders purchased from other outlets.

WINGTIP: Now is the time to have your bird feeders ready as our winter visitors will be arriving and our resident birds are preparing for winter. They will be locating food plots ahead of winter, and these birds will add well stocked backyard bird feeders to their list.



October is also the perfect time to make preparations to provide water for your backyard birds over the winter. One can almost attract more birds to open water when the temperatures plummet than with just wild bird feed alone.

If you have a bird bath heater or de-icer, now's the time to check and make certain it is still in working order. Since most are thermostatically controlled you can determine if it is working by putting it in your freezer for 30 minutes. Remove it from the freezer and plug it in. You should be able to feel the device warming up. If your bird bath heater or de-icer is covered with scale from last year, you can improve its efficiency by soaking it in a vinegar and water bath for about an hour, then scrub with a stiff brush. Repeat the process as necessary. Wild Bird Habitat has Nebraska's largest selection of bird bath heaters, de-icers and heated bird baths fully covered by a manufacturer's warranty.

October is a great time to watch your backyard for new visitors or get out to a park, lake, wetland or trail and enjoy the fall bird migration. The staff at the Wild Bird Habitat wishes good birding to all as the fall bird migration continues.

Why a Messy Garden is a Lifeline for Birds During Winter



As temperatures drop, the natural urge is to clear out the garden, rake up the leaves, and cut down dead flower stalks. However, wildlife experts and conservationists agree that leaving your leaves and standing seed heads is one of the most impactful ways to help backyard birds survive the winter. By skipping the intensive autumn cleanup, you provide birds with vital food, shelter, and a functioning winter ecosystems. When you skip trimming your summer and fall perennials, you preserve an invaluable winter pantry for backyard birds.

- **High-Energy Nutrition:** Dried seed heads from native wildflowers like coneflowers (*Echinacea*), Black-eyed Susans, asters, and goldenrod are packed with the fats and proteins birds need to maintain their body heat during freezing nights.
- **Natural Adaptation:** Seed-eating specialists like goldfinches, chickadees, juncos, and sparrows are evolutionarily built to perch on these rigid stalks and pick out tiny seeds all winter long.
- **Protein-Packed Larvae:** Stems and plant galls (like those on goldenrod stalks) often harbor dormant insect larvae, offering insectivorous birds a rare boost of protein when fresh food is scarce.
- **Insect Warehouse:** The leaves also harbor overwintering pollinators, butterflies, moths and other insects that become vital food for birds in late winter and early spring.

So take the fall off and go birding. Cleaning up the yard can wait until after winter.

The Value of Lincoln's Wildernwss Park

Wilderness Park in Lincoln, Nebraska, stands as a vital sanctuary where urban ecology and human well-being seamlessly intertwine. As the city's largest park, its expansive stretch of mature woodlands, meandering streams, and restored wetlands provides an indispensable green corridor. Beyond its role in flood mitigation and water filtration, the park serves a dual purpose: it acts as a critical haven for native and migratory birds while offering profound psychological and physical benefits to Lincoln, the human community that surrounds it.



A Lifeline for Avian Biodiversity

The long, north-south orientation of Wilderness Park creates a natural bird highway along Salt Creek, making it one of the most productive birdwatching locations in Lancaster County.

- **Critical Migratory Shelter:** During spring and fall migrations, the park provides an essential rest stop and foraging ground for mixed flocks of warblers, vireos, thrushes and many other bird species moving through the Great Plains.
- **Rich Habitat Complexity:** The combination of a dense, brushy understory, towering, mature tree canopies, and riparian wetlands supports stable, year-round populations of diverse insectivorous predatory and non-predatory bird populations.
- **Edge Ecosystems:** Wide sightlines along the adjacent Jamaica North Trail offer transition zones where birds easily feed and move between distinct habitat patches within the park.

A Sanctuary for Human Well-Being for Children & Adults

While the park protects avian life, it simultaneously functions as a powerful natural remedy for urban fatigue, fostering deep mental and cognitive restoration.

- **The "Birding Rx" Effect:** Recent ecological and psychological studies highlight that walking specifically to observe birds provide a superior boost to mental well-being and stress reduction compared to walking in isolated green spaces alone.
- **Cognitive Sharpening:** Navigating the dense trails and listening to the local canopy encourages sensory engagement. Identifying distinct plumage, behaviors, and complex birdsongs stimulates memory, pattern recognition, and sustained attention.
- **Physiological Calming:** The pervasive backdrop of natural birdsong within the forest has been systematically linked to lowered blood pressure and decreased cortisol levels, helping Lincoln residents unplug from everyday stressors.
- **Community Connection:** Whether exploring solo or participating in group walks hosted by organizations like the **Friends of Wilderness Park,** the shared experience of wildlife watching counters isolation and strengthens local social bonds.

By preserving this untamed landscape, Lincoln ensures that as the urban environment grows, its residents and wildlife continue to thrive together in a balanced, shared ecosystem well into the future.

We are fortunate that forty years ago a small group of Lincoln citizens formed the Friends of Wilderness Park and began the effort to recruit city officials to collaborate for the preservation of Wilderness Park, to protect it from urbanization, and incorporate it into the Lincoln Parks and Recreation system. By necessity, a few parts of Wilderness Park have been altered with road and bridge construction, but It continues to function well as a 15 mile long, 1472 acre all native green space creating a valuable natural resource nestled in the city. for everyone to enjoy.