

# Junco

The closely-held truths of wild nature are often difficult to uncover. Like the one electron postulated whimsically to serve the entire universe, said electron ever elsewhere when one looks for it, biological nature also discloses its secrets in glimpses, even to those who grant it standing. It's unfortunate that a legal term best fits the notion, which belongs to both heart and mind, that conjunction of opposites is the way the world works. Lovers of nature perceive and experience these glimpses through serendipity usually, whereas to the inattentive they may seem merely random. That is, not fitting our quotidian categories, they're not credited with true significance, "real data," but rather are seen as oddities easily dismissed. I'm that way myself, and my struggle to broaden my perception into ongoing interaction with the wild world has long teased me.

The clearing where I live has known several memorable storms in my domicile here. Technology now conjures better forewarning of extreme weather: we frequently know when Nature offers to serve up a Big One. One winter storm I remember well came on slowly, began with overcast equally subtle as ominous, light draining imperceptibly from the sky during the day, even as unseen Sol arced above. The occasional breeze lost vitality and fell into the mountain laurel; two-leggeds and four-leggeds disappeared one by one. Tiny desultory flakes volunteered to refresh the snowscape undulating out to the dark woods beyond. The immediate curtilage beyond the sliding glass door is grassy in snowless times, and offers seed-gleaning opportunities. If I pass by, the juncos, those little "nun-birds" sojourning from tundra, scatter instantly. On occasion they may creep cautiously toward the deck if I am still. However, on eye contact with me, they skirl away like blown leaves ...

Picking up soundlessly as daylight faded, swirls of snow roiled the deepening twilight. Later, gusts arrived, and the fitful curtain was flashing past horizontally. I sat for supper, the wood stove quietly radiating. The chilly dusk enveloped everything beyond the incandescent cone over the table. I fell to, comfortable, thankful, the wind now noisy, blasts shrieking and moaning; flung snow whipped chaotically round the ell. Then, a scratchy tap-tap behind me and down, at the door. A junco is on the porch, jumping up repeatedly, striking the glass with its beak. Again and again the bird leaps striking the glass in the corner that could open a slot and allow admittance to a warm world of yellow light...

I consort with animals when they indulge me, usually on their terms. I've done so long enough to accept calmly the gifts of a direct encounter when they present. How long I stared at the scene I don't recall. Heavy, crusted drifts; good shelter for mice but not birds. Extreme cold by morning; no storm cover for juncos anywhere out there.

I got up from the table, squatted on the floor before the glass. The bird, unfazed by eyes magnified by spectacles, squatted in an attitude of patience. Rising, I loomed above the fluffy critter, who did not flee; my aspect must have seemed gargantuan despite my slow, careful movements. I opened the door.

Junco - and icy winter - hopped across the threshold at once; I rolled the door closed. The bird shook itself and looked around from the floor between my bare feet. What now? For some reason I wanted to pick it up, and did, not without difficulty, for it flew up to window trim and perched. Possibly because I moved very slowly indeed, it allowed me to enclose it in my hand, where it struggled but briefly, tokenly. Full black dark now, temperature 20F and dropping. Out of the question to put it back outside. I found a small cardboard box, put Junco inside and closed the lid, my head full of vague wondering questions. The bird remained quiet all night while I slept. In the morning, the storm having blown by, Junco did not hesitate to dash enthusiastically into the frozen brilliance of a morning it might not have seen without the favor it indisputably sought of me ... Or is this "subjective speculation"? How do I know what juncos need to survive such nights? I was not the bird's 'savior', only a mere observer / participant in behavior which seemed mutually strange to both of us; but this was unquestionably "interspecies communication" and it warmly colored my feelings for days. How to deny that those urgent pecks were intentional, a directed signal? How can I not marvel at the insight that Junco brought to a situation which seemed clearly perilous to the little fellow?

Given: humankind widely various in our capabilities, each of us unique and special, unpredictable in our gifts, not the least of which is grounded skepticism, said to be the scientist's most valuable tool. I had plenty of justification from my EuroAmerican acculturation to disparage what this tiny scrap of feathers and flesh had done. It was a singular incident, a glimpse, one datum beyond possibility of replication, or even of further investigation. All I could think was, This is the way the world works.

Bob Ellis