

**Slate-coloured Junco (*Junco hyemalis*)**

**Dungeness 7-9th April 2008**



**Dylan - April 2008**

Whilst I readily admit to my dislike of “twitching” there are some birds that you just can’t ignore. When David Bunney discovered a Dark-eyed Junco in his tiny Dungeness garden (07/04/2008) I was at work. The first

I knew about it was at 22.30hrs when I logged on to Birdguides.

Intrigued, I wanted to see this bird if only it would stay put. Conditions, overnight, were not favourable. Looking out into the Thanet night showed that the skies were clear and the wind minimal – ideal for migration!

It was a long wait (08/04/2008) for news to confirm the presence of the Junco. I quickly phoned Gadget, but then had to wait for a call from my employers before plans could be made. Luckily everything slotted into place and just after 10.00 hrs we were on our way. Conditions were excellent, I have no idea why we didn’t spot a Common Buzzard along the route? The Elan Valley looks superb habitat for this majestic raptor.

We arrived at Dungeness just after 11.15hrs. Not exactly sure of the location of Sea View Cottage (David’s house) it didn’t require the skills of Inspector Morse to spot where the bird was. The massed ranks of telescopes and accompanying birders being a dead give away! Viewing was extremely limited, a tiny patch of gravel being the favoured spot, and only visible from two points around the perimeter of Dave’s garden. I set up my digi-scoping gear and waited for the bird to appear.

Luckily it wasn't much of a wait, however, the restricted viewing meant that the resulting images were not of the best quality. Much of the discussion amongst the assembled birders was of the sexing of this individual. The majority being in favour of a 1<sup>st</sup> winter female due to the obvious brown tones of the back, nape and wings. In the field, amidst the hustle & bustle of a "twitch" I have to agree that the brown colouration did point towards a female. Back at home, however, with more time to study my pics and associated literature, I am not so sure. The Dark-eyed Junco complex is made up of many closely related races, Slate-coloured Junco providing the majority of those recognised. The status of these various races being "lumped or split" depending upon which literature you consult.



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A typical view of the bird as it fed on the gravel patch, vegetation obscuring the tail, thus resulting in reduced picture quality. The brown tones of the back and wings are easily seen; the nape area colour is far more subtle from this angle. Another feature that helps with the sexing of this bird is the presence of newly moulted scapulars. In the above image they show up as a grey bar above the wing and are indicative of a 1<sup>st</sup> yr male. Something else that was noted, whilst watching this bird, was the general aggression towards it by a pair of Dunnock (*Prunella modularis*). On three occasions they were seen to chase it away from the gravel patch and paving blocks that the Junco seemed to favour.

My main source of information was from the excellent Buntings & Sparrows – Byers, Olsson & Curson (Pica Press 1995). Probably a little dated, it still contained enough detail to aid with my research. The nominate race of Slate-coloured Junco (*J.h.hyemalis*), and most likely candidate for vagrancy to Britain, can be sexed by the amount of white in the tail. Males showing white on their three outer tail feathers. Numbered from the outside inwards, T6 & T5 are pure white with T4 showing a variable amount of white but with a dark outer web on the upper surface.

As I stated before, conditions for getting decent images were not ideal. My digi-scoping gear being unsuited for focussing correctly between patches of vegetation. I took around 50 images through the scope and a further 10 with my EOS 400d. Sorting through these has enabled me to pick out a few features that I had missed in the field, despite the fact that I spent over two hours with the bird.



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**(*Junco hyemalis*)**

An atrocious flight pic, yet it does clearly (?) show that the tail feathers on the bird's left (T6, T5 & T4) are predominantly white and thus further evidence that this individual is a 1<sup>st</sup> winter male.

Something that is also very obvious from my pics, and those of many others, is that there are feathers missing from the right side of the tail and the left side of the upper tail coverts. I am not suggesting, for one minute, that these missing feathers are a sign of captivity. When you think of the journey that this bird must have undertaken to arrive in a tiny garden on the Dungeness shingle a few damaged/missing feathers is a small price to pay. A back view of this bird shows that T6 & T5 are missing from the right side of the tail, but it does allow a view of T4, which reveals the white inner web and dark outer web consistent with the pattern of a nominate male.



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A rear view showing the extent of the brown tones on the back, nape and head. This shot also allows a view of T4 on the right side of the tail and shows the thin dark outer web and broad white inner web of the upper surface. Notice the upper-tail coverts, there are clearly feathers missing from the left hand side.

So my little foray into my library has enabled me to satisfy myself that the bird is a 1<sup>st</sup> winter male of the nominate form of Slate-coloured Junco (*Junco hyemalis hyemalis*) The date on which this individual turned up is fully consistent with the bulk of other occurrences within the UK, mid – April & May being the peak period. Quite why they are generally thought to be ship-assisted is a bit of a puzzle; maybe they can't get tickets at other times of the year? My own thoughts are that they have probably arrived, un-detected, in Europe the previous autumn and are now following their normal spring migration north, only on the wrong side of the pond! It is yet another mystery that makes birding such a fascinating hobby.

As for the missing feathers? Is it possible that the interaction with the Dunnocks in Dave's garden was not unique and this individual has been subjected to other instances of aggression, thus resulting in feather loss?

I am indebted to Gadget, as usual, for providing the transport and company on our sojourn to Dungeness. To David Bunney for the discovery and willingness to share the Junco with so many others. To the other birders/twitchers who were present on the day, I have to admit that it was really good fun, many thanks.

## **References**

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