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Two occurrences of auditory abnormality in the Dark-eyed Junco

Elizabeth W. Brooks and Regina M. Van Scoy

Two similar banding encounters during October of 1978 merit attention.

At 1645 hours on 24 October 1978 — a mild and sunny day—an AHY-U Dark-eyed (Slate-colored) Junco, *Junco h. hyemalis*, was banded (#1510-97016) at Regina Van Scoy's banding station at Limestone in Cattaraugus County, New York (coordinates 420-0783). The bird was caught in the bottom trammel of a mist net, with several strands of the net around its neck. The bird did not appear to be in distress, however, and was easily removed from the net. While removing the bird, Van Scoy noted there were pale flesh-colored, sac-like protuberances — about 4 mm long extending from each ear canal. They appeared to be air-filled, and inflated or deflated according to the position in which the bird was held. After the bird was removed from the net, the sacs deflated and within 30 seconds were pulled back into the ear canal. During banding, Van Scoy carefully checked the ears, and the bird appeared normal in all respects. Upon release it flew normally and gave typical chipping notes.

At 1620 hours on 27 October 1978, during relatively clear, calm weather, Elizabeth Brooks removed a U-U Dark-Eyed Junco from a mist net at her banding station which is located at Alfred Station, Allegany County, New York (coordinates 421-0774). Although a strand of netting was wrapped around its neck, the bird was easily extricated and did not seem to suffer any netting trauma. While Brooks was removing the bird from the net, she noticed orange-yellow, 3 to 4 mm sac-like protuberances extending from both ear canals. The junco was banded (#1500-83089), measured, and then placed in a holding bag in preparation for more careful examination and photographing. (See photo by Dr. Gaylord Rough of the Alfred University Biology Department.) The protuberances appeared to be fluid- or air-filled and could be made to inflate or deflate by turning the bird in various positions. After approximately an hour of holding and handling the bird, the protuberances were still essentially as they were when the bird was first caught. The junco reacted normally to sound. Upon its release, it flew in a normal manner and uttered a typical metallic chirp.



Both occurrences were described to Dr. Stephen W. Eaton (Biology Department, St. Bonaventure University), who believed that, in both cases, the entire external auditory meatus everted from the tympanum outward. His theory was that too much pressure may have built up in the lungs and air sacs and, when the pressure was released, the bill did not open quickly enough and the nostrils were somehow closed. This caused the air to go up the eustachian tubes, and the pressure caused the entire external auditory meatus to evert (pers. comm.).

We are both relatively inexperienced banders, and therefore we are not sure just how unusual this occurrence may be. We have found no mention of it in recent literature, and the one experienced bander we have questioned has never observed it. The fact that it occurred twice within 3 days, at sites 47 miles apart, is indeed interesting. The two are remarkably similar, with the exception that the external auditory meatus remained everted in the latter case.

Perhaps the blockage was caused by foreign matter, a respiratory infection, or possibly it was trauma induced by netting. We would appreciate hearing from anyone who has had a similar encounter or who might have a more plausible explanation. 📧

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