

# The Outside Story



## Angry Birds

By: Carolyn Lorié

One morning in mid-March, I opened the door to discover a dark-eyed junco frenetically battling another bird. Or at least *it* thought it was another bird. His nemesis was, in fact, his own reflection in the stainless-steel chimney of my wood stove. The junco was perched on a bracket between the chimney and the house and every few seconds would flutter in front of his reflection and repeatedly peck it.

The chimney was still cool, as I had started a fire only minutes before, but I assumed that eventually the heat would deter the bird from getting too close and that would be the end of that. But it wasn't. The steel apparently never got hot enough, and the conflict raged on.

Hoping to save the junco from exhausting himself for no good reason, I tossed some pebbles at the chimney. One or two

pinged against the metal and off he went. This kept him at bay for about two minutes and then he was back at it.

The fight dragged on all morning, into the afternoon and evening. And then the next day, and the one after that. Two weeks later, the intermittent episodes of ferocious and fruitless tussling between the junco and his metallic twin continued.

Dark-eyed juncos are year-round residents of Vermont and the steel chimney has been a part of my house since I bought it more than six years ago. In other words, neither the bird nor the chimney were new to the scene. What changed was the bird's priority. Mating season had begun, and the junco was now singularly focused on defending his territory.

"We usually see this with songbirds, particularly the ones that nest in trees and shrubs near our houses," explained Steve Hagenbuch, a conservation biologist with the Vermont Audubon Society. In addition to dark-eyed juncos, duking it out with one's reflection has been noted among American robins, northern cardinals, chipping sparrows, eastern bluebirds, northern mockingbirds, song sparrows and American goldfinches. Even wild turkeys and ruffed grouse have been known to do this.

Though I had witnessed this behavior in other birds, I had never seen such a persistent display. I was baffled that the junco never figured out – after hour upon hour of pecking at steel – that there was no threat. "I suspect that the drive to ward off a possible male competitor is so

strong that they just go after anything that is of the same species in such close proximity,” said Hagenbuch. “Birds are pretty amazing creatures, but they are birds after all.”

And birds, like most animals, do not recognize their own reflections. At least the vast majority of birds don't. In his book, *The Thing With Feathers*, birder and naturalist Noah Strycker described a study in which five magpies were presented with mirrors. The researchers allowed the birds to explore the mirrors and get used to them. Once they seemed at ease, the researchers marked the birds' chins with a colorful substance. Upon seeing their reflections, three of the birds scratched at their own faces to remove the marks, suggesting they recognized their reflections. I suspect that if this study were repeated with juncos, the outcome would be different.

Time will tell how long my resident junco will battle the chimney. Hagenbuch suggested it could go on until the young have fledged, taking with them the need to defend any territory. For the bird's sake, I hope he declares victory long before then.

*Carolyn Lorie lives with her rescue dog and very large cat in Thetford, Vermont. The illustration for this column was drawn by Adelaide Tyrol. The Outside Story is assigned and edited by Northern Woodlands magazine, [northernwoodlands.org](http://northernwoodlands.org), and sponsored by the Wellborn Ecology Fund of New Hampshire Charitable Foundation: [wellborn@nhcf.org](mailto:wellborn@nhcf.org)*

**Northern  
Woodlands**

PO Box 471, Corinth, Vermont 05039  
Tel. 802.439.6292 Fax 802.439.6296  
[www.northernwoodlands.org](http://www.northernwoodlands.org)

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