

Focus on the Blue Tit

There are three juvenile Blue Tits on the feeders within 11 feet of my desk as I write this. For many people the Blue Tit is THE garden bird and BTO work in gardens going back over 25 years, shows that very nearly every garden has Blue Tits coming into it at some time during the year. Indeed many gardens have Blue Tits coming to them throughout the year, especially if food is available all the year round.

So why do they come? In the natural world Blue Tits would be birds of woodland, breeding territorially in holes in trees during spring but flocking together and roaming the woods looking for food outside the breeding season. Why flock? Because dozens of pairs of eyes are better than one in two important respects. The first is in finding food - if one flock member finds a good source of food it will stay feeding and the other flock members will converge on it. The second advantage is in spotting predators - and the duel between the Blue Tits in your garden and the local Sparrowhawks is thousands and thousands of generations old. Keeping half an eye cocked for the flash of a Sparrowhawk is not enough - twenty eyes may be!

For birds like Blue Tits our gardens are like open woodland. Even if there are only a few trees, the buildings which mimic their height and spread give an additional dimension to the habitat. By providing food clumped at feeding stations we are providing the birds with Christmas every day and their gregarious behaviour means that they can easily exploit it without too much in the way of squabbling. And it is just as well we provide food as many of the garden plants and trees provide very little food for the tits compared with the fantastic variety and quantity of food found on our native forest trees. Species like Oak, Willow, Alder and Beech provide food year round and particularly during the breeding season. Our gardens often have sterile cultivars which provide no fruit or nuts and which come from exotic areas and have few, if any, insects on them.

This is one of the reasons why garden nestboxes are often less successful than ones in native forests. Blue Tit broods are very well synchronised so that 90% of them hatch within one week. This is so that they can take full advantage of the huge numbers of caterpillars and sawfly larvae on the fresh leaves - these develop and pupate quickly because the leaves quickly build up toxic loads of tannins. I once found a run of nestboxes

with Blue and Great Tit broods in a Welsh Oak wood which had 18, 13, 15, 14 and 15 chicks! Many garden broods, unless there are native trees in range, struggle to fledge any young and six or seven may be excellent.

Autumn is the time when the fewest Blue Tits are generally coming into gardens - September and October - but the birds start to come back in November. Mid-winter sees the peak in numbers but there can be transitory rushes if the weather becomes cold and stays cold. The spring is a time when the birds are under pressure and we get more ringing recoveries (mostly of dead birds) in March, April and May than during any other three month period. This shows that it is really important for them to be fed in the spring and early summer.

Chris Mead

Blue Tit

Fascinating Facts

How many?

Over many years of winter ringing in many different gardens I have come up with a quick rule of thumb. If you can see 10 Blue Tits at a time on your feeders the chances are that 100 different Blue Tits are visiting your garden during a single day and, over the whole winter, 500 may be coming.

Survival

There is mounting evidence that garden Blue Tits survive rather better than their country cousins. The lack of production from garden nestboxes is compensated for by better survival of adult birds. Even in productive native woods, insects hibernating in the nooks and crannies of the bark are much more difficult to find than peanuts or sunflower seeds in the feeders. But even then it is a rare garden Blue Tit which reaches its fifth birthday and probably only one in ten thousand that reaches its tenth.

Questions of age and sex

Ringers try to determine the age and sex of the birds they catch to ring. For Blue Tits, the crucial age determination is to try to find a break in the colour of the medium sized feathers on the wing - if the renewed blue ones contrast with the old green ones, the bird is young. If they are the same shade of blue, the bird is an adult. This works from September right through to the summer. A brighter blue wing, with electric blue forehead, means that you have a male - greener wings with a duller head will be a female.



Blue Tits by Tommy Holden © BTO