

Focus on the Great Tit

One of the most familiar garden birds, consistently in the Top Ten and top of the pops for research ornithologists, Great Tits are easy to see, readily aged and sexed and they love nest boxes — the ideal 'guinea pig' for wild bird investigations. *Chris Mead.*

In the garden the Great Tit is essentially a hanging food feeder. Just outside my window, as I write this, there have been five in the last two minutes. One was using the food bar, one looked in the empty mealworm feeder, one is hammering away at the peanuts and two are scoffing black sunflower seeds. In the wild their usual habitat is deciduous woodland and here they feed both in the trees — on seeds and insects in the winter and on caterpillars in the breeding season — and on the ground. In fact under a beech tree which has dropped its mast you may come across flocks of a hundred or more. Great Tits are much more likely to be on the ground than Blue Tits although, in mixed autumn flocks, both species are likely to keep in the trees.

Great Tits are fantastic birds to watch, active and beautifully coloured. If they are coming close, screw your binoculars down to minimum focus distance and look really hard at their plumage. The birds with the yellow cheeks, dull crowns and without the black line down the belly are summer juveniles. They will moult into adult-like plumage in August and September and then the fun starts. Birds with very glossy black crowns and wide black belly stripes (from leg to leg) are males and duller crowned birds with narrower stripes are females. If you are able to look very hard at the wings and you can see a contrast between newer bluer greater coverts and older greener ones (or primary coverts) you are looking at a bird which fledged the previous summer.

The bill of the Great Tit is a precision instrument allowing it to manipulate all sorts of food. In the woods it has the drop on the other tits in the short time it takes to manipulate beech mast and in the way the birds can hammer at acorns, hazelnuts and even the hard inner seed of the yew. In the summer the Great Tit bill is used much more for gathering insects and there is good evidence that the birds make their bills more efficient for this activity by wiping them frequently — this wears down the sides of the bill and the lack of hammering away at seeds allows it to grow longer! Compared to other tits, the Great Tit loses out a little on agility as its weight will bend the thinnest twigs that can support a Blue Tit or Coal Tit. Luckily for the smaller birds, some food will be left at the very ends of the branches which the Great Tits can't reach.

Chris Mead



Great Tit by Tommy Holden © BTO

Great Tit

Fascinating Facts

Big bullies

At the bird feeder one often sees aggressive interaction both among Great Tits and between Great Tits and other birds. Within a flock feeding on beech mast there is a pecking order. Young females, the smallest birds, are kept away from the centre of the flock and are therefore more vulnerable. A Sparrowhawk will reach them first or a cat could be concealed in nearby vegetation when the most dominant birds will be further away. This is reflected in the mortality rate of the young females. But, as with other small birds, survival is rather poor. On average from every pair that sees it through the breeding season and their six or eight young only one of the parents and one youngster will survive to breed the next year.

Listen out for the calls

Some people think that Great Tit song is very simple — they say 'Teach you' hundreds of times every day don't they? Well yes and no. Song is for attracting a female and defending a territory and starts on fine December mornings when birds will leave the winter flock for a quick territorial sing. The repertoire seems simple but the song phrase used are varied and each bird uses three or four — very 'good' birds may as many as eight. These impress the female but crucially impress incomers who think they may be able to steal territory, but at a quick hearing may think there are extra males about and depart!

'Chez Nous' in a nest box

The best, and really only, place to nest is in a hole. If that has been specially made by a Human to the exact specification the Great Tit needs then it is difficult to resist. Especially if the natural nest sites are not, as they often are not, EXACTLY right. Great Tits like bigger and deeper boxes than Blue Tits and need the hole to be 28 mm diameter at least — Blues will use holes of 25 mm or even less. An ordinary garden should have at least two nest boxes so that one can be used by each species. You can register for National Nest Box Week (see page 8) to receive details of this event and the detailed instructions of how to make your own garden boxes.

Great Tit by Tommy Holden © BTO



Brightly coloured and agile, Great Tits are one of the most entertaining garden favourites, but their "amusing" behaviour and vivid plumage are all part of a struggle for survival.