

Focus on Long-tailed Tit



Long-tailed Tits have small black, white and pink bodies, with a long tail. Young birds are duller in appearance than their parents and lack the pink colouring completely. Because the young moult shortly after leaving the nest, they soon look indistinguishable from their parents. Birds from other parts of Europe look somewhat different from those found in Britain and Ireland – for example, we are occasionally visited by individuals from northern Europe, distinguishable by their all white heads. Photographs (above and right) of British Long-tailed Tits by Jill Pakenham.

Some of the most popular features in *Bird Table* used to be the 'Focus On' articles written by the late Chris Mead. With an increased number of pages in *Bird Table*, now is an ideal time to relaunch these, this time using the extra space to provide an even more detailed look at the various birds which use our gardens. We are starting the series with Long-tailed Tit.

Despite its name, the Long-tailed Tit is only distantly related to the Blue and Great Tits with which it often associates. The word 'tit' used to be used to describe any small bird and the Long-tailed Tit is certainly small, weighing in at between 7 and 10g. The appearance and behaviour of this species make it one of the most delightful of garden visitors, attracted to peanuts, fat and other fare at garden feeding stations. Garden BirdWatch figures show that usage of gardens peaks in late winter, especially February and March, when food may be scarce in other habitats. Being such small birds, Long-tailed Tits are susceptible to cold winter weather. This susceptibility explains why numbers can fluctuate so dramatically, with the breeding population sometimes reduced by up to 80% following a particularly severe winter. Fortunately, recent winters have been relatively mild, prompting an increase in numbers. There has also been an increase in the Garden BirdWatch reporting rate.

The social behaviour of this species has been well-studied. During the winter months, small parties of Long-tailed Tits may gather together to forage for food within a defended territory. At the end of the winter, these parties break up as pairs start to build nests within the territory. At this stage, the pairs may continue to roost communally with the group, although unpaired females may leave to join a neighbouring flock. Many of the nesting attempts will fail – Long-tailed Tit nests are especially prone to predation by various members of the crow family. If an individual attempt fails early on, then the pair may try again but if they fail at a later stage, they will give up on breeding themselves and become helpers at another nest. There has been quite a bit of debate about the possible benefits of helping at a nest that is not your own and it is interesting to note that 'helpers' preferentially help at the nests of close relatives. This is advantageous to those being helped because more food can be provided for growing chicks. It is also potentially advantageous for the 'helpers' who, unable to rear any chicks themselves that year, can at least help close relatives (whose chicks will share many of the same genes as the 'helper') and thus ensure that at least some of their 'genetic identity' makes it into the next generation. In essence, they are making the best of a bad job.



Facts & Figures

Common name: Long-tailed Tit

Scientific name: *Aegithalos caudatus*

Family: Long-tailed Tits

UK population:

Breeding: 220,000 territories

Migratory status: Resident

Conservation status: Favourable

Breeding:

Clutch size: 7 – 12

Incubates: 14 – 18 days

Young in nest: 15 – 16 days

Number of broods: 1

Breeding season: March – June

GBW Reporting Rates:

January – March: 30%

April – June: 12%

July – September: 9%

October – December: 16%

Distribution:

Found across Britain and Ireland. The map shows 10-km squares containing (a) gardens where Long-tailed Tit has been recorded using GBW gardens (green) and (b) gardens where Long-tailed Tits have yet to be recorded (grey).



Photograph by Dick Jeeves

That Long-tailed Tits are able to preferentially help relatives, hinges on the ability of individuals to recognise their kin. Recently published research has demonstrated that they do this through contact calls. Individual birds have their own distinctive character to these calls – it is a bit like you being able to recognise the voice of a close relative. Young birds learn to recognise these calls when they are in the nest and it seems likely that this learning continues to be reinforced by the communal foraging and roosting that occurs later in the year. This is all the more amazing because Long-tailed Tits have quite a limited repertoire of calls.

Long-tailed Tit flocks can be great fun to watch. You will often see them feeding within a tree, foraging close to the end of the branches, and then one individual will move off with the others following in a 'follow-my-leader' fashion. This can be particularly entertaining when the group encounter an open area that has to be crossed. Any individuals that become separated from the flock become quite agitated and call loudly as they search for the group. Flocking together has other uses, especially in winter, when individuals will huddle together to keep warm. Research has shown that the lower the temperature the closer together the birds get and it has been suggested that, because such communal roosting may be essential for surviving periods of very cold weather, this is why these birds are so sociable in their behaviour.

Although Long-tailed Tits are more strongly insectivorous than Blue and Great Tits, they have increasingly learnt how to exploit some of the new food sources provided at garden feeding stations. These include: fat (especially if smeared onto branches), small seeds, finely-grated cheese and bread crumbs. During the winter they will also search dead flowerheads, looking for overwintering insects. Away from gardens, Long-tailed Tits prefer to forage in the canopy of taller trees and shrubs, searching for small insects and the eggs and larvae of moths.

Mike Toms

Amazing nests

Long-tailed Tits build elaborate domed nests, often placed in the middle of thorny bushes. The nest itself has an outer structure, which is then lined with up to 2,600 feathers, a process that may take 39 days to complete. The birds prefer feathers that are between 2 and 4 cm in length and, judging from experiments that have been carried out on feather availability and use, there does not seem to be any shortage of these. One of the most amazing aspects of the nest building process has only been discovered within the last few years. It seems that Long-tailed Tits use the feather lining to regulate the temperature within the nest and are able to accurately gauge how many feathers they need to get the temperature they want. Researchers discovered this by adding feathers to nests that were already under construction and then recording how many more feathers were brought in by the birds themselves. The birds were able to adjust the number of feathers they collected to accommodate the additional ones that had been added by the researchers.



Photograph by George H Higginbotham

