

Birdlife In Your Garden

Coal Tits are widespread and relatively common in south Shropshire. They are frequent visitors to garden feeding stations, although they are not recognised by many householders, perhaps because they lack the bright yellow, blue and green hues of Blue and Great Tits. Superficially, they resemble a small version of the latter (about two-thirds the length) as they have black caps, black bibs and a white patch on the cheek, but they lack vivid plumage colours. The back is olive-grey, the underparts are greyish-buff and, most obvious of all, the nape (back of the neck) is occupied by a bright white patch. There is no yellow on the bird at all (unlike the Great Tit) and the wings show two light wing bars, not the single one sported by its larger cousin. The black bill is small and well-adapted to feeding in conifer woods, the natural habitat of this species, although it is also common in mixed and broad-leaved woods, parks and gardens.

At our feeders, Coal Tits behave differently from other tits. They often fly in quickly, grab a seed and immediately fly off. In part, this is because, as the smallest British tit, they are low in the feeder pecking order and may be bullied if they remain. There is another reason, however. Late in the year, Coal Tits hide food (in moss, under bark, in cavities etc.) for retrieval in winter when it is in short supply. This is called 'caching'. Research suggests that they are able remember where they hid food for about four weeks. At our feeders they favour sunflower seeds, peanuts and suet. In the wider countryside, Coal Tits relish insects, seeds (especially larch, Sitka spruce, alder and birch) and nuts, which they seek in restless, agile, acrobatic forays through the topmost and outer branches of trees. From late summer to spring they may join other species of tits (as well as Goldcrests, Nuthatches and other birds) in flocks that sweep rapidly through woodlands and gardens in the search for food.

Coal Tits are resident, sedentary and nest locally, often in holes in the rotting root systems of conifer trees but also in small mammal burrows, in gaps in stone walls, in the old nests of Magpies and unused squirrel dreys. The nest is made of moss, hair and grass and is lined with fur or feathers. They will also make use of nestboxes. To encourage Coal Tits in your garden, put up closed boxes with a 28 mm (1.1 inch) diameter hole, preferably mounted on a conifer. The small size of the Coal Tit means that it may find it hard to maintain ownership of a nestbox in competition with Blue and Great Tits so put up plenty of boxes to give them all a chance. Coal Tits raise only one brood per year.

Coal Tits are not elaborate vocalists. Their song is a strident and repeated sooo-chee and they maintain contact in flocks with a somewhat questioning tweee? call.

Cold conditions bring these birds into our gardens, as does rainy weather, which prevents the cones of conifers opening, depriving them of the seeds within. Check out the feeders in your garden for the diminutive Coal Tit and make sure you can differentiate it from its Great Tit relative.

John Arnfield



The black cap and bib, greyish back, double wing bar, buffy underparts, delicate bill, white check and white nape identify the Coal Tit. Note that, unlike the Great Tit, there is no hint of yellow plumage. (Photo: Aidan Tidnam, BTO Library)

The author is British Trust for Ornithology Ambassador for the Garden BirdWatch (GBW) scheme in southern Shropshire and is available to speak to local organisations on GBW, as well as answering questions on garden birds and feeding. If you would like free leaflets on garden plants and birds, please contact John on (01694) 724170 or at arnfield.2@osu.edu.