



Blue Tit: the garden acrobat

Look at me mum! – Juvenile Blue Tit by Steve Round

The Blue Tit is such a familiar bird that it is easy to be dismissive of it. In fact, you could easily apply the term ‘common or garden’ to the Blue Tit, using it in an almost derogatory manner. Needless to say, once you dig a little deeper you soon discover there is a lot more to the Blue Tit than first meets the eye and it remains one of our most confiding, inquisitive and engaging garden visitors.

GARDEN LIFE

Although really a bird of woodland, the Blue Tit has adapted to the garden environment, taking advantage of the opportunities on offer in this relatively new habitat. Having said this, it appears that Blue Tits living in deciduous woodland are more productive than those living in gardens, the abundance of woodland caterpillars and other small invertebrates providing them with the vast quantities of food needed to raise their single brood of chicks. Research has shown that while the average number of eggs laid by females using woodland is 10.9 (mature oak woodland), the

average in gardens is lower, at just 8.8 eggs. Since each egg weighs roughly 1.1g, it is easy to see why the female (average weight 10.6g) might do better in woodland, where she has access to all this protein-rich prey.

Additionally, nesting attempts made in garden nest boxes may be more likely to fail at the chick stage than those made in woodland, again a consequence of the lower availability of favoured prey within the garden environment. During the time that a large brood of Blue Tit chicks are in the nest they may receive up to 20,000 caterpillars. Do you think that a pair of Blue Tits would find this many suitable caterpillars in your garden?

Where gardens do better, however, is during the winter months when the food on offer at bird tables can make a significant difference to overwinter survival. Individual garden feeding stations can attract large numbers of Blue Tits, with small flocks (often mixed with other tits and the odd Goldcrest) passing through the garden each day. Many of these will range over quite a large area, perhaps taking in not just other gardens but also other



By Mike Toms
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BLUE TIT

The need for calcium

Some 6% of the weight of a Blue Tit egg is shell, the main ingredient of which is calcium carbonate. In order to form each egg the female Blue Tit has to find the necessary calcium, perhaps in the form of old egg shells or the broken shells of snails. Some seed mixes have added oyster-shell grit to help provide calcium.



Blue Tit by Jill Pakenham

This image of a Blue Tit bathing appears on a computer mouse mat and is available from the BTO Catalogue and Online shop. Order yours for £3.75 (plus p&p) and help support our work. Visit www.bto.org or call 01842-750050 and ask for BTO Catalogue Sales.

Blue Tit bathing by Steve Round

habitats locally. You can imagine then, how a garden located next to a piece of mature oak woodland might be ideal for a Blue Tit, combining an abundance of breeding season invertebrates with the security of a garden feeding station during the winter months.

ACROBATICS

Watch a Blue Tit on a peanut feeder, or working its way around the buds on the outer branches of a tree, and you will soon discover the tremendous agility and strength of these

little birds. Blue Tits certainly spend a greater proportion of their time during winter feeding at the ends of branches and around buds than do the other tits. They also tend to feed higher in trees than the other tits, a behaviour shared with the unrelated Long-tailed Tit. Differences in feeding site, and in the size of prey taken (which also differs between the tit species) reduce the degree of competition for food and may be one reason why the different tit species can form mixed flocks in winter.

As any bird ringer will tell you, Blue Tits have an incredibly strong grip, especially for such a small bird, and their claws scratch even the toughest of fingers. This grip, combined with their small size (and low body weight) means that they can comfortably hang on to small twigs, tree trunks and even walls as they probe for food. The same tools can be applied to good effect on mesh peanut feeders.

OPPORTUNISTS

One of the most engaging characteristics of the Blue Tit is its seemingly bright and resourceful nature. Perhaps the most often quoted example of this is the way in which they began pecking at milk bottle tops to get at the cream within (possibly not as endearing if it was your doorstep pint that was being targeted). This behaviour developed and spread rapidly across parts of the country,



FACTBOX : Blue Tit

though it has effectively disappeared now that most householders purchase their milk from stores and supermarkets. Another piece of resourceful behaviour sometimes witnessed by BTO Garden BirdWatchers is where Blue Tits peck at window putty. This putty often contains linseed oil and the tits seem to have developed a liking to it. Again, changes in our habits (in this case the switch from wooden window frames to plastic ones) may alter the degree to which this behaviour is seen in the Blue Tit population.

This resourceful nature reflects a degree of adaptability in Blue Tit behaviour, something that may enhance survival and which has also enabled the Blue Tit to exploit human-modified habitats like gardens.

IN THE EYE OF THE BEHOLDER

Blue Tits are attractive birds and frequently feature on greeting cards or as illustrations in children's books. Adult males are brighter than females and are also slightly larger, useful characteristics for bird ringers who get to see the bird in the hand, but less obvious for the casual garden birdwatcher. Young Blue Tits are identifiable though, their pale lemon yellow cheeks and forehead separating them from older birds.

Interestingly, how a Blue Tit appears to our eyes is different from how it appears to another Blue Tit. This is because birds' eyes show a very different degree of sensitivity to ultraviolet (UV) light than our own. Once researchers discovered this, they examined bird plumages to determine if they had a UV component (which they did) and since then the Blue Tit has become one of the key study subjects for researchers interested in how birds might use UV signals in sexual selection and mate choice. Male Blue Tits vary in the degree of UV colour and colour contrast in their crown feathers, which is broadly related to age and which might provide females with a badge or signal of the male's quality.

ON THE MOVE

Blue Tits are not renowned for moving great distances and ours could certainly not be considered migrants. Scandinavian birds, however, do undertake long distance movements, some of which may occasionally deliver individuals to our shores. In the relatively recent past, when Scandinavian winters may have had a more pronounced impact on Blue Tits, we sometimes received irruptions of these birds to southeast and eastern England, the foreigners identifiable because of their more colourful plumage.

Common Name: Blue Tit

Scientific Name: *Cyanistes caeruleus*

'*cyanus*'=dark-blue (fr. Greek) + '*caeruleus*'=blue (Latin)

Family: Paridae

World distribution:

BREEDS: Across Europe, the Near East & NW Africa

WINTERS: as above

Habitat in Britain : Woodland, scrub and gardens

Diet: Insects and spiders, also fruit and seeds in winter

Population:

Breeding: 3.3 million pairs

Winter: as breeding

Conservation Status: GREEN

Migratory Status: Resident

Average date of first arrival: Not applicable

BREEDING ECOLOGY:

Clutch Size: 8–10 eggs

Incubation: 13–15 days

Young in nest: 18–21 days

Number of broods: 1(2)

Age at first breeding: 1 year



Blue Tit eggs by Mark Mainwaring

Typical lifespan: 3 years

Maximum recorded lifespan: 9 years 9 months



Blue Tit by Christine M Matthews

How you can help:

Many gardens lack the standing dead wood and natural tree cavities required by hole-nesting birds like Blue Tit. You can help by erecting a suitable nest box (entrance hole diameter 25mm or larger).

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