



Chaffinch: the 'bachelor' bird

Male Chaffinch by Steve Round



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The Chaffinch is a woodland bird that has seemingly adapted well to the built environment. It is accessible, familiar and often confiding, allowing close-approach and offering the opportunity to engage with this endearing and colourful finch. Its relative adaptability makes the Chaffinch one of the most abundant and widespread birds across Britain and Ireland.

FINDING A HOME

Chaffinches can be found breeding in a range of habitats, where suitable trees and shrubs occur for nesting and for use as song posts. The highest densities tend to occur in deciduous and mixed woodland but coniferous woodland, farmland hedgerows, gardens and parks are also well used.

Established males tend to use the same breeding territories in successive years, often remaining with their mate from the previous year throughout the winter months. These are the birds that are first to establish themselves come spring, the male initially advertising his presence through short periods of early

morning song. As the season progresses, so the male will spend more and more time in the territory advertising his ownership. Young males, on the other hand, are more tentative in their behaviour, moving into apparently vacant territories and only gradually proclaiming their presence. Initial visits by these young males involve some soft calling and then utterance of sub-song, a simple imprecise version of the full song. Over time, the young males will make greater use of any song perches scattered throughout the territory and ultimately they will proclaim full ownership. Newly established males will also check the territory for suitable nest sites and, once satisfied that the territory has some, they will play no further part in nest site selection.

THE DOMINANT PARTNER

While male Chaffinches are dominant over females outside of the breeding season, it is the female that is very much the dominant partner during the summer. This change in dominance comes gradually, the male learning to keep his distance from his mate even though

FACTBOX : Chaffinch

he accompanies her just about everywhere throughout the breeding cycle. It is thought that this behaviour ensures that the female has access to the best feeding opportunities that the breeding territory has to offer.

The period of pair bonding lasts for about six weeks, after which the female selects her preferred nest site and begins to construct the delicate and beautifully camouflaged nest. The nest itself takes about a week to build, though some can take up to 18 days, the female making some 1,300 visits with nesting material over this period. An outer shell of lichen and spiderwebs is very similar to that constructed by Long-tailed Tits, and it has a grey-green appearance and pliable nature. Within this there is a layer of moss and grass, followed by a layer of just grass. The final of the four layers is the lining and this consists of thin rootlets and feathers

Most Chaffinches start egg-laying during late April or early May, the female laying one egg each day but not beginning incubation until the penultimate egg has been laid. During this period she will feed herself, leaving the nest roughly once every hour for a short break, accompanied by the male. In fact the male continues to do very little, even when the eggs have hatched, and it is the female that feeds and tends to the chicks.

BRINGING UP BABY

Chaffinches feed their chicks on caterpillars and the female will initially make 3–4 feeding visits to the nest each hour, sometimes splitting the food between different chicks. The chicks themselves are blind, naked and helpless when they hatch and barely manage to manoeuvre themselves so that their heads face towards the centre of the nest. By adopting this position the young chicks physically support each other as they raise their heads to receive food. In nests with just two young, the individual chicks can struggle to lift their heads to secure food.

As they grow, so the chicks become stronger and better able to take food from the female. Their demands also increase, the female now making 8–9 visits per hour but still with no help from her mate. It is only when the chicks leave the nest that the male helps with food provision, effectively looking after the chicks for a further three weeks. The chicks disperse into thick cover and tend to remain motionless and difficult to spot, only moving when the parent approaches with food. This behaviour makes them less likely to be spotted by potential predators.

Common Name: Chaffinch

Scientific Name: *Fringilla coelebs*

'*fringilla*'= a sparrow (Greek) + '*coelebs*'= unmarried (Latin)

Family: Fringillidae

World distribution:

BREEDS: Europe, N Africa, NW Asia (introduced elsewhere)

WINTERS: As above

Habitat in Britain : Woodland, farmland and gardens

Diet: Various invertebrates and seeds, widest diet of our finches

Population:

Breeding: 5.6 million pairs

Winter: Population doubled by arrival of immigrants

Conservation Status: GREEN

Migratory Status: Resident; winter visitors are short-distance migrants mostly from Scandinavia but with some birds from Finland and NW Russia.

BREEDING ECOLOGY:

Clutch Size: 4–5 eggs

Incubation: 12–13 days

Young in nest: 13–16 days

Number of broods: 1

Age at first breeding: 1 year

Typical lifespan: 3 years

Maximum recorded lifespan: 11 years 7 months



Papilloma on Chaffinch by Andrew Cannon

How you can help: Although a number of different agents may cause swellings on the legs of birds, Chaffinches are susceptible to *Fringilla papillomavirus*, which causes warty growths. Help reduce the risk of this disease spreading between individuals by cleaning feeding stations regularly.



Chaffinch by Derek Balsey, Cliff Riedick

www.bto.org/birdfacts

CHAFFINCH

Breeding finery

Watch your Male Chaffinches from winter through into spring and you will see them attain their breeding plumage. The change is especially noticeable on the head, where the dull feather tips of the crown wear away to reveal the slate-grey breeding colouration beneath.



Chaffinch by Steve Round

SIMPLE SONGSTER

Chaffinch song is probably one of the most recognisable sounds of spring and early summer. It is a bright and loud series of notes, introduced by a series of 3–4 sharp notes which are followed by a similar series of notes at a lower tone, all rounded off by a lively flourish. This song may be endlessly repeated, the male advertising both his territory and his suitability to a potential mate.

Thomas Bewick, writing in 1826, commented that the Chaffinch was seldom

kept in a cage since its song possessed no variety and the bird seemed incapable of learning any tune presented to it. This assertion, made in Bewick's classic work *'A History of British Birds'* appears to have been a little wide of the mark, perhaps because of his location in the northeast of England. In London during the 1800s, Chaffinches were kept as caged birds and used in singing competitions, a wager being placed on the bird singing the greatest number of phrases over a set period. This 'sport' was probably practiced by Flemish merchants, having originated in Flanders under the name *'Vinkensport'* (finch-sport).

Early proponents of the sport sometimes indulged in the cruel practice of deliberately blinding the birds in order to increase their song output. Thomas Hardy's poem *'The Blinded Bird'* was directed at this cruelty and a campaign in the 1920s, led by servicemen blinded in the trenches, is said to have brought about its end. *'Vinkensport'* is still practiced in the Flanders region of Belgium, using captive-bred birds of various finch species.

ON THE MOVE

While our breeding Chaffinches are predominantly resident in habits, with most pairs wintering within their summer range, many populations elsewhere in Europe are migratory. The arrival in Britain and Ireland

Female Chaffinch by Steve Round



of a good number of these migrant birds each winter leads to a rough doubling of our Chaffinch population. Most of these winter visitors have their origins in Norway, Finland and Sweden but they are joined by small numbers of individuals from farther east.

Recoveries of ringed Chaffinches suggest that these birds move through Denmark and the Low Countries during autumn, before crossing the Channel to enter southern Britain. A good proportion of the birds are likely to remain in the southern half of Britain but some will filter further west. Examination of the composition of these winter flocks often reveals a skew towards the flocks being dominated by one sex or the other. Such differences are a consequence of female Chaffinches tending to move further west than the males, resulting in female-dominated flocks in Ireland and the southwest of Britain and male-dominated flocks in eastern England, The Netherlands, Germany and Switzerland.

Where distinct components of a bird population migrate in different ways from one another this is known as *differential migration*. In this instance, the difference may result from different pressures on the two sexes. The males are dominant so are likely to be stronger competitors for scarce winter foods; potentially they also benefit from wintering closer to their breeding areas, shortening the migratory

journey in spring. The females are likely to be outcompeted when food is scarce so move further afield, something they can afford to do because there is less urgency associated with their return to the breeding areas.

UPS AND DOWNS

An examination of your Garden BirdWatch and Garden Bird Feeding Survey returns reveals that Chaffinches make greater use of garden feeding stations in some years than others. Interestingly, this pattern of garden use has been shown to reflect the size of the seed crop produced by Beech trees. The seed, known as beechmast, is a favourite autumn food of the Chaffinch and in those years when the crop is poor the birds increase their use of garden seed supplies. This pattern is also seen in several other species, including Woodpigeon, Great Spotted Woodpecker and Nuthatch – all for the same reason.

Observant Garden BirdWatchers might also have noticed Chaffinches with growths on their feet and legs. Although there are several agents that might cause such warts, one of the most important is a disease called *Fringilla papillomavirus*. The resulting warts vary in size from a tiny nodule to ones which engulf the whole foot. Make sure you keep feeding stations clean to reduce transmission opportunities. ■



Chaffinch nest by Mike Toms



This Chaffinch nest (top) is beautifully camouflaged and difficult to spot. The lower image shows the position of the nest (red lines).

Male Chaffinch by Steve Round and (insert) a map showing the autumn migration route of our winter-visiting Chaffinches. From *Time to Fly*, available from BTO sales.



The Chaffinch has sometimes been called the 'bachelor' bird because male birds dominate in the winter flocks found in some areas, a result of differential migration of the two sexes (see text for more on this).