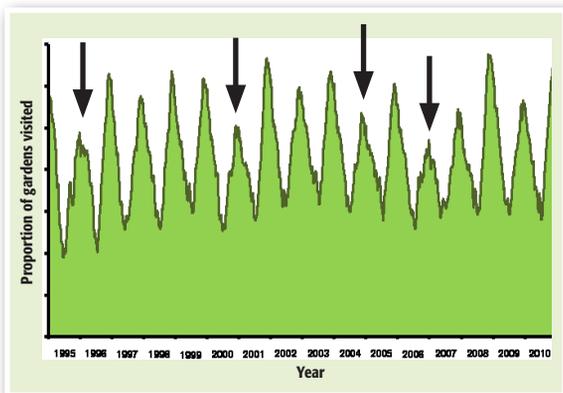


Focus: Coal Tit



Main picture: adult Coal Tit. Insert: juvenile Coal Tit – note the pale lemon yellow cheeks, the colour extending down onto the breast. Both images by Steve Round (stevenround-birdphotography.com)

The winter peak in garden use not has great when there has been a good crop of conifer seed (arrowed).



Smaller than a Blue Tit, and also more agile, the rather delicate Coal Tit is an often overlooked visitor to garden feeding stations. Its small size places the Coal Tit low down in the pecking order and this may be one of the reasons why Coal Tits are regularly seen to take food from hanging feeders to eat or store elsewhere – they simply cannot defend a feeding perch against the other more dominant species.

EVERGREEN LEANINGS

Coal Tits can be very common in coniferous woodland and certainly make greater use of this habitat than our other tit species. The small size and agile nature allow the Coal Tit to glean food from between pine needles with its narrow bill. British Coal Tits use broadleaf woodland to a greater extent than their continental cousins and, as a consequence, have slightly larger bills. In Ireland, where there are fewer conifers, Coal

Tit bills are even larger. Small differences in bill size between individuals using different habitats may seem inconsequential. However, it is known that even very small differences in bill size can have a competitive advantage.

THE IMPORTANCE OF CONIFER SEED

If you look at your Garden BirdWatch records going back over a number of winters you might find that the number of Coal Tits using your garden varies from one year to the next. This pattern is particularly evident when we examine the wider set of Garden BirdWatch records; there are some years where the use of gardens is much lower than in others (see graph, left).

An analysis of your records in 2007 by Ailsa McKenzie, revealed that the use of your garden feeding stations by Coal Tits was related to the size of the Sitka Spruce seed crop in British forests. In those years when the seed crop was good, there was a decline in the use of gardens, but in those years when the seed crop was poor, Coal Tits increased their use of our gardens. This pattern was also seen in Siskin.

SELF-STORAGE

Watch Coal Tits visiting your feeding station and you may well see one taking food away to store elsewhere, making regular sallies back and forth over a short period of time. This behaviour, known as food caching, is seen in a number of different bird species (think of Jays with acorns or Nuthatches with sunflower seeds) and it is used as a buffer against future food shortages.

Coal Tits tend to scatter hoard, in that they don't place all of their hoard in the same place, preferring instead to place each food item separately. The question of just how good or bad their memory may be is answered, in part, by the appearance of sunflower plants in flower borders where they had not been sown by the gardener!

Seeds form an important component of the diet during autumn and winter, the lack of favoured invertebrates forcing the Coal Tit to switch its attentions to what is available. Even so, they will take any hibernating insects that they can find, sometimes even from the undersides of conifer branches heavy with snow. The combination of hoarding, the switch to tree seeds and the agility of this small bird, may explain why it seems to cope with cold winters more successfully than other small species.

SQUEEZED OUT

Even if you have Coal Tits visiting your garden throughout the year, you may be hard pushed to get them to use a hole-fronted nest box. This is because they are readily ousted by the larger and socially dominant Blue and Great Tits which are also looking for cavities in which to nest. You can, however, improve your chances by using a nest box with a small entrance hole (c. 25 mm diameter). You could also try using a box with a narrow vertical slit, rather than a round hole.

The nest itself is built by the female, the male continuing to defend his territory and only getting more involved once there are young chicks to feed. Unlike Blue and Great Tits, Coal Tits are more likely to have a second brood later

in the season, something that may also contribute to their success. Long-term monitoring of Coal Tit populations through the BTO's Common Birds Census and the BTO/RSPB/JNCC Breeding Bird Survey, which has since replaced it as our

main monitoring tool, has highlighted a remarkable period of stability stretching back to the mid-1970s. This followed an earlier period of rapid population expansion, thought to have been triggered by the opportunities afforded by thousands of acres of maturing plantation forestry across much of Britain & Ireland.

The Coal Tit remains a welcome visitor to garden feeding stations, perhaps in part because it is less common than its larger and more obvious cousins. Look out for this black-capped tit, with its distinctive white rectangular panel which runs up the back of the head (a feature not shared by any other European tit). ■



FACTBOX: Coal Tit *Parus ater*

Population:

Breeding: 600,000 pairs

Winter: unknown, but resident population swelled by young and some immigrants.

Conservation status:

GREEN (favourable)

Diet:

Insects and spiders; also seeds in winter. Mostly taken from outer branches of conifers.

Longevity:

Typical lifespan: 2 years

Max recorded lifespan: 18 years 9 months, 26 days

Breeding Ecology:

Clutch size: 9–10 eggs **Number of broods:** 1–2

Incubation: 14–16 days

Young in nest: 16–19 days

Age at first breeding: 1 year

