



The Blue Tit

The Blue Tit is one of our most common garden birds and is well loved by many. There is no greater satisfaction than having a nest box in your garden which is full of baby Blue Tits being fed by their parents. Interestingly, they tend to fair better in more natural areas such as woodland, than gardens because the latter cannot always supply the quantities of food they require at nesting time.

They are endearing, acrobatic and mischievous looking birds. Both sexes are similar but the male is more brightly coloured although this is difficult to tell in the field. They have a blue crown, white cheeks and a dark blue eye stripe. The back parts are bluish green and their underparts are yellow. Young birds are duller in appearance and their cheeks are yellow instead of white.

As with other birds, May is a very busy time for the Blue Tit. After finding a suitable mate, the female will start to make a nest, without any help from the male. The nest is first moulded in to the shape of a cup using moss and, when ready to lay her eggs, the female will line the nest with feathers and wool. I usually hang out my cats' combings of fur and the Blue Tits soon take it all. The timing of their egg laying is crucial as the birth of their young has to coincide with the appearance of their main source of food, caterpillars. The female may lay 8 to 12 eggs and will incubate them until they hatch. The male may feed her while she is doing this but not always. Inclement weather can sometimes catch the birds out, especially once the chicks have hatched. If this happens, some or all of the chicks may perish as the parents may be unable to find sufficient food for them.

Once hatched, each chick needs to eat about 100 caterpillars a day. After fledging, usually in June, they will remain with their parents for a few weeks and at this time it is helpful to supplement their diet of insects and spiders with some sunflower seeds and peanuts. Please do not supply birds with loose whole nuts as they can choke on these.

If you would like to encourage Blue Tits to nest in your garden, use a small box with an appropriate sized hole 25 mm in diameter. If the hole is too big, it will allow other birds to use the nest box. The nest box should be sited between 1m to 5 m above the ground giving the birds a clear flight path to the entrance. Ensure it is sheltered from prevailing winds, rain and strong sunlight - it may help to tilt it slightly downwards. Early spring is the ideal time to erect a nest box. However, don't worry if it is too late now as birds may use the box to roost in. Please bear in mind there are no guarantees that they will use the box and you may have to be a bit patient.

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Jean is a voluntary Ambassador for the British Trust for Ornithology's (BTO) Garden BirdWatch scheme in Nottinghamshire. If you would like to help the BTO be recording birds and other wildlife which visit your garden, please contact Jean at jpbirds@talktalk.net

Photo of a Blue Tit bathing by John Harding / BTO