

## Birdlife In Your Garden

There are about half as many Great Tits as Blue Tits in UK gardens but they are still very plentiful. Birds of open deciduous and mixed woodland and woodland edges, Great Tits have adapted well to human habitats and occur in nearly four out of five Shropshire gardens. In Britain, they are not migratory and grace our gardens all year around, where they will establish breeding territories in January and raise one or two broods of chicks over the following spring and summer. Nesting is timed so that the young hatch at the time of peak caterpillar abundance.

Few species could be confused with an adult Great Tit. It is the largest and most robust of the tit family in the UK. The male has a somewhat dome-shaped black head, bib and neck, prominent white cheeks, an olive and grey back and lemon yellow underparts. The wing has a single white bar. A black stripe extends from the bib down the centre of the breast, often extending to a black patch between the legs. Males with broader, darker stripes are socially dominant and breed more successfully.

Females are very similar but colours tend to be less intense and the bib and chest stripe are less well developed. Immature birds resemble females but have olive-brown necks and are generally greyer on the back and tail.

They are cavity nesters but readily swap holes in tree trunks for nestboxes with 32 mm (1¼ in.) holes. The nest is constructed of plant fibres, grass, moss, hair and feathers by the female alone, in which she will lay seven to nine eggs. Only the female incubates the eggs but her mate assists in feeding the young once they have hatched. Great Tits are laying eggs eight days earlier now than in the 1960s as a result of global warming. Caterpillars are emerging earlier too but these two events are not necessarily in synchrony and lower rates of chick growth and starvation may be occurring in some cases. Generally, nests in undisturbed woods produce healthier chicks than those in gardens, perhaps as a result of the greater abundance of insect food sources.

Great Tits prey on invertebrates, especially insects, spiders and snails in summer, but add berries and seeds in autumn and winter, when they may also join mixed species foraging flocks. They are very fond of sunflower seeds and peanuts at feeding stations. Large food items are held in the feet on a branch and hammered with the bill. They will also remove the heads of caterpillars and large insects in this way before feeding them to their chicks.

Great Tits have an extraordinary range of songs and calls, many of which consist of two syllables such as the familiar territorial teacher-teacher. However, they may have up to 40 different vocalisations and males with large repertoires tend to be dominant and breed more successfully.

Unfortunately, Great Tits have recently shown enhanced susceptibility to avian pox, a viral disease that leads to grey, pinkish-red or yellow warty growths on the head - particularly around the eyes

or beak, legs, wings or other body parts. Some birds recover from this condition but others develop large growths that may impede feeding and vision and can lead to an increased risk of predation. The disease is spread, at least in part, by contaminated feeding stations, so take some time to ensure that you are not contributing to this avian health problem by regularly cleaning and disinfecting your feeders. If you are unsure how to do this, please contact me.

*John Arnfield*

*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 724 170 or at [arnfield.2@osu.edu](mailto:arnfield.2@osu.edu).*



*photo by Chris Bradley*



*photo by John Harding*