

# Closely Observed Birds

**John Kirkman** examines the differences between the species in his garden.

Have you ever noticed whether or not the birds in your garden or local patch are ever still and calm, like old men dozing on a park bench, or are on the move all the time, like small children round the play area in the same park?

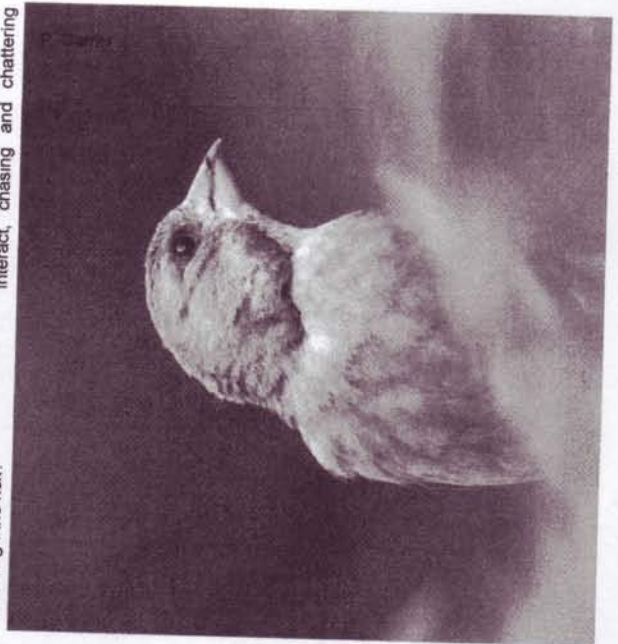
The tits, for example: they are pretty well all fidgety live-wires. The smaller the bird, the more hyper-active. Coals and Long-tailed I have never seen stop still for a second. Blues will pause for a few seconds, but they are constantly swaying, and twirling their bodies, as though their nervous energy is bursting against any constraint. Greats are very similar. It's seen to be a driven family.

Greenfinches will spend spells of ten or twenty minutes in my garden, treetops, on survey, the male often wheezing his jingle. Of course, they are looking round, for there is always the Sparrowhawk threat, but the birds are not shaking with the need to dart off. Chaffinches are less static than greens, and Bullfinches rarely seem to take a break, at least in Bradway.

The few sparrows that now visit often spend time in a large and dense cotoneaster. They sit in the foliage, with just their heads poking out, all safe and sound. Cheeping away to each other, and again swivelling their heads to scan the skies, they will be there for half an hour before departing.

So in the finch-sparrow group, size seems not to be a factor, the species having their own characteristics.

Woodpigeons and Collared Doves are quite happy to have sedentary spells. The former feed voraciously in the morning rush-hour, then will sit for an hour, occasionally crooning, arranging feathers, and seemingly to doze. Even more relaxed are the Collareds, which might be there for two or three times as long. A pair will touch beaks, sit with shoulders touching, preen themselves or each other, and seem also to sleep. There are dangerous practices, for the local female Sparrowhawk is no slouch, as testified by the frequency of feather-piles in the district. What advantage has evolved to outweigh the risk?



for a whole morning, while Crows will sit around and watch.

Or take the existence of crests, or at least of feathers which can be raised or fluffed to make the head look bigger or to convey a message of determination, anger or aggression. Blue Tits raise the feathers on their crown, but I don't think Great Tits do. They flaunt their chest-stripes or bow and sway instead.

Chaffinches do the same as Blue Tits, but Bullfinches and Greenfinches appear not to - in my patch, anyway. Blackbirds also lift their topknot, but use their whole body on occasion. Thus an interloper male Blackbird landed in a bush next to the resident, which erected all its non-flight feathers, so seeming to double in size and be full of bristles. The other elongated itself, fanned its tail and made sinuous side-to-side snake movements. This display failed to cow the holder of the territory, and the subordinate bird left. No fighting took place, or even the more usual diagonal pacing, or the running near each other.

Crows fluff all their head and neck feathers. A relaxed Crow in our treetop looks smooth and sleek, any worry, such as the near approach of the neighbour's Crows, causes the proud-head warning appearance. Magpies, however, I don't observe doing this.

The pigeon family also approach the bird table differently. Our Stock Doves never use it, neither landing on the roof nor venturing onto the table itself. The other three species certainly will. Sharring goes against the grain for Woodpigeons; ill at ease, they glare at each other, make themselves as tall as they can, and it's not long before only the dominant is there. Ferals and Collareds are quite different. Neither will share with the other, but are happy enough with their own. Four or five Ferals will squeeze in, tails in each other's faces, but show no aggression. Collareds occupy the space in pairs, but again quite peacefully.

Gaining access to the covered

section they find quite hard. All three species perch on the roof, peer down, make false starts, before performing a clumsy half-circle downwards flutter, the Woodpigeon being particularly heavy as it does so.

Observe also the distinction or otherwise of birds on the nut-holder. The four tit species are confident and agile, flying straight on, or hopping with directness and vigour from a nearby twig. Sparrows vary, at least in our garden, some are like tits, others have to spur themselves on. Around the country I have seen Starlings that cope well, being nimble and well-coordinated, but not so their Bradway brethren.

Ferals and Stock Doves ignore the holder, but Collareds and Woods will occasionally land on a twig and look longingly. One will now and then try to land and cling, others will strain forwards and

reach through the underbars to nubble nut fragments loose.

Chaffinches are surprisingly incompetent. The sparrows leave them behind. Greenfinches are bulkier than Chaffinches, and look clumsier, but are adept on the feeder. Bullfinches are there much less often, but are capable. So why does the Chaffinch struggle? One will hover, with great intensity, before the feeder, yet fail to make contact. Another will edge along the twig and, with diffidence, creep inside the frame, seeming to find the whole thing too much. Siskins, of course, are as adept as tits. Dunnocks use the feeder less often, but are good at getting in. So too is a Wood Mouse, that climbs the trunk, runs along the branch and down the string. No bird will go on while the mouse is there, even though it is only the size of a Coal Tit.

