

THE TIT FAMILY

WHO? Great Tit (Resident, Common), **Blue Tit** (Resident, common), **Coal Tit** (Resident, common), **Long-Tailed Tit** (Resident, quite common, in groups), **Marsh Tit** (Resident, not so common, NOT IN MARSHES > OAK & BEECH WOODS!), **Willow Tit** (Rare Resident). **Bearded Tit (Reedling)** (Rare Resident, in Norfolk reeds), **Crested Tit** (Rare Resident, Scottish conifer forests only).

QUICK HINTS: (This is not to replace bird identification books but to point out MAIN I.D. POINTS, and introduce you to bird folklore.) Right place? Right season? Right shape? Right noise? What to look for when you only have a glance...

NOTE: 1st four in gardens; next three mostly in fields, parks, playing fields; last two specialist areas only.

Great Tit: [Black Capped Lolly (N.Hants); Black-Headed Bob (Devon); Saw-Sharpener (Roxburgh); Sharp Saw (Norfolk); Sit-ye-down; Ox-eye (Midlands); Joe Ben (Suffolk); Heckymal (Dartmoor); Tom Noup (Shrops)]

When: RESIDENT; GARDENS

Where: Common: in gardens, fields, farmland, all woodland... almost anywhere + bird tables.

Colour: Male: Status = width of black stripe (the wider the better!) down yellow breast = 'Badge'. It goes down between legs. Female's narrower stripe tapers out halfway down belly. Status dominant males get the best and more sheltered feeders away from sparrowhawks. All-over black head except for white cheek patches (Ox-eyes). Yellow bellies each side of stripe. Yellow-green wings, with one white wing-bar (Coal tit has 2).

Shape: Largest Tit, the size of Chaffinch. Longest tail (except for long-tailed tit – but they have a tiny body)

Song: Sounds like A SAW: *TEE-cher, TEE-cher, TEE-cher, TEE-cher*, (Low-high) Dec-May

Call: *pink-pink-pink + many, many others.*

Seen: Bushy areas, nests in holes. Feeds in lower branches of trees and bushes, especially in winter. Also on ground more than other tits. On beech mast. Holds nut on perch to hack at it. Bold, tame, taps like woodpecker.

Interesting Facts:

- The name 'TIT' is short for 'Titmouse' (as in the USA). It scurries along branches like mice. Middle English (Icelandic): *'tittir'* = small. + 'Mouse' Old English: *'mase'* = small bird (i.e. a small, small bird!). By C16, *'mase'* = *'mose'* >> *'mouse'* (mousy movements of Titmice).
- It's the ONLY TIT WITH WHITE OUTER TAIL FEATHERS.
- It tends to feed by trunks and larger branches, including conifers, also on the ground, but can feed upside-down in canopy.
- The effort of feeding chicks = equivalent to bringing home 100kg of shopping everyday for three weeks: Dr Andy Gosler. Hatched chicks need to increase their weight 15 times in 2 weeks.
- Late summer, autumn/ winter: roams in MIXED flocks.
- They hold beech mast and acorns in their feet and hammer them open with their bills.
- It is observed that as Great Tits switch from winter seeds and nuts to spring caterpillars, their short robust bills become longer and less deep to carry more invertebrates (as puffins do).
- Juvs form same-age gatherings in early autumn.
- Great Tits, like Blue Tits, have some 200 different songs and calls.
- Lifespan: 3 years. Max recorded age: 13 years 11 months. They are increasing since 1960s.
- 2 million breeding pairs in March to July. They need deep boxes with holes of at least 28mm.
- Similar nest and eggs to blue tit.
- The mother cannot get enough heat to incubate the eggs properly until the last is laid. Then a bare patch of skin (brooding patch) becomes hot with blood vessels to raise the eggs to 35.4°C. She maintains this by alternating 30 mins incubation and 10 mins break! What skill! Presumably most birds do this...
- When they fledge, the parents take them some distances showing them all the best feeding bases.

Blue Tit: [Blue Cap, Blue Bonnet (Shrops, Scotland); Blue Ox-Eye; Blue Spick (N.Devon); Nun; Pedn-play, tree-babbler (Cornwall); Pinchem (Beds = song); Tinnock, Yaup; Bee Bird (Hants); Willow Biter, Billy Biter (Midlands); Pickcheese (Norfolk); Tom Tit, Hickmall, Heckymal, (OE: 'hicemase') Titmal (West Country)]

When: RESIDENT; GARDENS.

Where: Common: in gardens, fields, farmland, oak woodland... almost anywhere, including reedbeds.

Colour: Bright blue with yellow chest; narrow dirty black stripe down belly. Stunning cobalt blue cap, white face with narrow black eye-strip and throat strap round white cheeks. Short blue tail. Juvs have blotchy markings and wash of yellow where adults have white.

Shape: Tiny, very agile. 12cm. Weight: 11g.

Flight: Rounded blue wings in flight. Rapid and straight.

Song: Upside down SAW: *CHER-tee, CHER-tee, CHER-tee* (high-low) + GIGGLE (whatever variation of song it uses, it always ends up with a giggle: *he-he-he-he* (fast on one note)

Call: pinks, two-note shouts. Loud, long SCOLDS. If in doubt, it is usually a Tit, probably a Blue Tit! Fledglings make an incessant frothy call when begging from a perch.

Seen: bushy areas; uses holes / nest boxes. Flocks late summer to early spring with mainly its own. Feeds upside-down often. On outermost branches of deciduous trees. Bold, tame, irrepressible. Not often on the ground. Uses bird tables. Inquisitive.

Interesting Facts:

- Not normally in conifers.
- Size: about 5".
- If there weren't gardens, it would live in oak woods with high insect life and cavities for nests.
- However, garden feeders ARE VITAL IN WINTER & KEEP SOME 1000 BIRDS ALIVE.
- About 200 or so move on a regular local 'beat' through the nearby feeders in a day.
- Can be aggressive at bird tables, even against Great Tits.
- They lay only about 8.8 eggs in gardens compared with 9.7 in woodland (10.9 in oak woods): lack of caterpillars and spiders. They can starve to death in nestboxes.
- They breed once in Britain and Ireland, laying up to 16 eggs at a time. All eggs in one basket.
- Females need to find calcium everyday to lay another egg. From snail shells – even eggshells.
- They can feed young up to 1000 times a day with caterpillars.
- They are very bright: they peck at milk-bottle tops for cream and linseed-oil based putty.
- They are fearless – C16 song: *'I have a pretty titmouse Come pecking at my toe...'*
- Bustling activity: John Clare says: *'The bluecap tootles in its glee, Picking the flies from orchard tree.'*
- Few bluetits visit feeders in autumn but are back by November.
- Typical lifespan = 3 years. Max recorded age: 9 years 9 months.
- Population: 3.3 million breeding pairs, between March and July.
- Nest: pad of moss + dead grass. Cup lined with hair, wool, fine grass + feathers in cavity or nestbox.
- 8-10 white eggs with fine red spots at the broad end.
- It eats insects, spiders, fruit and seeds.

Coal Tit: Anglo-Saxon: Colemase. (Coal=charcoal, not modern coal) [Black Cap Tit (Shrops); Black Ox-eye (Forfar); Coaly Hood (Scotland); Tomtit, Coalmouse (Ireland);]

When: RESIDENT; GARDENS.

Where: Common: in gardens, conifer or mixed woodland. Prefers conifers for nest.

Colour: a colourless Great Tit with same large cheek patches and black crown. **Long white patch** at back of head. 2 white wing bars (Marsh and Willow Tits have 0). Pretty buff-pink chest.

Shape: small – very agile. Shortest tail of tits. Very fine bill to get into pine-needles. Big head.

Flight: will hover more than other tits.

Song: A MUCH FASTER SAW THAN GREAT TIT. Squeakier: *soo-CHEE, soo-CHEE, soo-CHEE...*

You usually hear the Coal Tit before you see it – except on the feeders – then look for white patch at the back of the head...

Call: *Twee?* (like a question)

Seen: nests in hole low down, even in roots or rocks. Feeds in topmost and outer branches of conifers – difficult to see, but hovers to reach extremities. Feeds on bird tables and ground. May join roaming flocks especially with goldcrests.

Interesting Facts:

- Eats invertebrates throughout the years, but nuts in autumn and winter,
- It can hop up a tree, like a Treecreeper.
- It has trebled in numbers since 1964.

Long-Tailed Tit: [Long-tailed Mag, Long-pod (Midlands); Long-tailed Pie, French Pie; Dog-tail (Cheshire); Long-tailed Capon (Hants, Norfolk); Long-tailed Chittering; Long Tailed Muffin, Hedge Mumruffin (Worcs, Shrops); Ragamuffin Juffit, Fuffit (Lothian); (From nest shape:) Jack-in-a-bottle; Bottle Tit (Berks, Bucks); Pudding Bag, Bush Oven (Norfolk); Hedge Jug; Bellringer, Millers Thumb=Millithrum;]

When: RESIDENT; GARDENS. Quite common, in groups. Again you hear them before you see them.

Where: Common: in gardens, deciduous woodland with wide undergrowth. Bushes, hedgerows

Colour: Pink-flushed body; head and crown white; black stripe curls round eye; it widens on nape goes down outer wing feathers and down tail. White outer tail feathers. Pretty.

Shape: Tiny ball of coloured fluff with really long tail. Unique.

Flight: when not breeding, seen in family flocks, never alone – 20+ birds in autumn; 10 max in winter.

Usually 3-4, but joined by other tits. Weak flight; unique rapid undulations.

Call: *see-see-see-see* (contact call); *tupp* (close together); *splutters* (if separated).

Seen: beautiful nest, not in hole; soft lichen dome in thorny shrubs or high in tree fork. Recognised by restless movement through bushes in groups, constant calling, long tails with body a ball of fluff. Searches outmost twigs acrobatically. From lower to upper branches. Never on the ground. Hangs on nuts and feeders.

Acrobats.

Interesting Facts:

- 5-10 relatives patrol a large territory together in autumn and winter.
- They cuddle together at night to roost, as they suffer from cold.
- They share feeding and protection duties as a group, helping each other out.
- Their tail is more than half their length; it dips up and down during flight.
- They can line their beautiful nest with over 2000 feathers.

Marsh Tit: [Marsh Titmouse; Joe Ben (East Anglia); Black-headed Tit (Somerset); Saw Whetter (Staffs)] **BOLDER TWIN OF THE WILLOW TIT – RECOGNISE ITS SONG. NEVER IN MARSHES!!**

When: Rare Resident; easier to find than Willow Tit, but still not common.

Where: NOT IN MARSHES > OAK & BEECH WOODS! Holly. Damp areas + lots of undergrowth.

Colour: brown with GLOSSY black cap and beard, SMALL white bib. Cap looks bigger than white. Glossy black. NO PALE PANEL ON WINGS. CHEEKS DIRTY BROWN. Sexes alike.

Shape: Smaller and slimmer than Willow Tit. Pale SPOT at top of bill.

Flight: Stay in same territory all year. Small groups may join passing tits within the area. Don't go out of boundary. Long confident flight.

Song: Fast 5-10 notes per second: sawing *si-swoo*, or *swe-swe-swe-swe-swe-swe-swe* (whistled) [7+ notes]

Call: Fast, high-pitched, jaunty, explosive, **sneeze:** *pitch-u*, *si-sooo*, *si-swee*, *swe-oo*, *squee-soo*, *swip-swip-zu-zu*. *Squit-zee-zee-zee-zee*, (1st syllabus rises sharply)

Seen: uses old holes + moss. At bird feeders. Less shy than Willow. Feeds on lower branches, more excitable, vigorous hammering / tearing action. In open. Lives in pairs with large territories, not flocks.

Interesting Facts:

- Steals Willow Tit excavated holes, as does not make its own.
- Hammers seeds with its bill

Willow Tit: [Willow Biter (Notts)] **SHY TWIN OF THE MARSH TIT – RECOGNISE ITS SONG.**

When: EXTREMELY RARE RESIDENT; mostly found in Midlands and North of England.

Where: Prefers DAMP WOODED CARR, on edge of marshes. Scrubby areas round water and lowland conifer woodland, at top of trees. Willow (of course!), alder, elder, birch.

Colour: VERY LIKE MARSH TIT: brown with black cap and beard, white bib. WIDER WHITE FACE SWEEPED BACK TO BLACK. Pale wing panel. Dull black. Buff underneath. Untidier. Sexes alike.

Shape: Neat. Larger head, BULL-NECK (Mike Tyson Tit!) muscle to excavate holes; black bill.

Flight: pairs in same territory all year as do Marsh Tit. Small groups may join passing tits within the area. Don't go out of boundary. Slow short flights, stepwise approach.

Song: (Feb-April) Sad, slow, descending: *sui-swee-swee-swee-swee-swee* or thin wistful *si-si-si-soo-soo-soo*.

Call: (Less often than Marsh Tit) Low, deep, sombre tone (Tit-Willow): 'deep', 'djur-djur-djur' (scolding); or *chay-chay-chay*. *Chick-a-baby! Nasal eez-eez-eez*. [Less but longer notes like Nightingale]

Seen: In singles and pairs only. Makes own holes in narrow, rotten trunks, does not use moss. Not so often at feeders. Shy. Feeds close to ground but not on it.

Interesting Facts:

- It was only distinguished as a separate species from the Marsh Tit in 1897 by the British Museum.
- It is the only tit to excavate its own hole, leaving chippings under it.

Bearded Tit: renamed: BEARDED REEDLING! [Bearded Pinnock, Beardmanica, Reed Pheasant (Norfolk); Water Pheasant (Sussex);] THE NON-TIT TIT! (NOT THE SAME FAMILY) THE REED TIT.

When: RESIDENT; (Rare Resident, but found in Norfolk reeds).

Where: Large Reedbeds ONLY.

Colour: Male: grey head and sideburns (moustache, NOT BEARD!) BLACK UNDER TAIL & Female brown head: rich tawny body; short orange tit-like beak; acrobat like blue tit.

Shape: SMALL, long tail,

Flight: low brief flights over reed-tops: whirring action, straight course, trailing tail (like mini-pheasant)

Call: 'Ping – zching!' Repeated. BUT REED WARBLER CAN IMITATE IT!

Seen: KEEPS LOW DOWN, ESPECIALLY IF WINDY. Go by sound. In winter they pick at seedheads at the top. Summer eat insects at water level. LOOK FOR LONG TAIL And WHIRRING WINGS MAKING SHORT FLIGHTS OVER REEDS.

Interesting Facts:

- Very sociable, travel in small parties.
- Depending on the health of the reedbed, a number of tits usually have to leave the colony. The result in late September is a 'high flying' farewell party! On a still sunny day, one bird gives a rallying call: a loud 'pching', and a party of some 25 birds fly straight up into the air, calling to each other. They may reach some 100m and out of sight (but not sound) to the perimeter of their reedbed. then as quickly, they plummet down to earth and fall silent. Sometimes they miss and land in a field or bush and have to zoom back in. Their tails seem too long for their whirring little wings and so usually they fly low.
- After a number of 'high flights', some birds peel away from the rest and fly in mixed adult, juv groups looking for a winter reedbed south-west of the main bed. In spring, they return to the home breeding base as food sources increase. No fanfare then – they just slip back in.
- Spring: nesting; summer: catching water creatures at the bottom; autumn: make short, high flying zooms upwards and calling; then dropping down; winter: at the top eating the seed-heads.
- To change its diet completely, it swallows up to 400 tiny stones and its muscles strengthen. Heavy!
- It is related to the family of BABBLERS, found in Europe, not the Tit family.
- Captured as cagebirds in the 19th Century, and was in danger. Peaked again in the 1980s, but holding its own.
- The name Pinnock comes from the sharp 'chink-chink' call.
- It was known as the Lesser Butcher Bird only because it looks like a small version of the Red-Backed Shrike, known as the Butcher Bird.

Crested Tit: NOT IN NORFOLK.

When: RARE RESIDENT;

Where: Scottish Caledonian pine conifer forests only. Especially spruce.

Colour: Crest black + white scales ('salt and pepper' like grey hairs on a black headed person). Body subtle shades of brown with no wing bars, paler below. Black throat and neck band, small black eye-stripe. Sexes alike, both with crests.

Shape: Unmistakeable if raises crest

Flight: flocks in own territory with passing flocks of other tits.

Call: Quiet trill + high pitched *seep* notes

Seen: trees with moss and lichen. Nests in rotten tree stumps. Unmistakable but hard to see. Feeds by searching lower branches and ground. Very shy. Rarely on bird table. Lives in groups of 2-4 in fixed territory.