

## January 2008: Meditations on Chickadees

The chickadee is not an exotic bird in these parts. Many days, especially this time of year, it's the only species I see--along with its cousin the tufted titmouse. The two tit species visit my feeder regularly, often seeming to scold me from very close at hand when I take it down to refill, as if urging me to hurry up. Before dusk they seem particularly active, stuffing themselves to get through the long, cold night ahead. Before a storm, too, they are unusually attentive to the feeder, as if they can sense that food might soon not be so easy to find.

Maine's primary chickadee species, the black-capped, is also our official state bird and on our license plates--a more acceptable image, in my opinion, than the red lobster that used to grace those first illustrated plates. As an emblem of Maine, the chickadee is a democratic choice. Sure, Maine might be the lobster capital of the world, a place whose destiny was shaped by its fishing industry. But the chickadee is everywhere in this state, in pretty much everybody's backyard, in almost any habitat, year-round. And it's such a lively, almost tame bird--who doesn't love a chickadee



Albino Chickadee; Photo Credit: Don Reimer

In a recent conversation with a friend who's an avid and well-traveled birder, I was surprised to learn that his favorite bird is the chickadee, because they're such an everyday sort of bird. I figured he'd go for something exotic or at least colorful, like indigo bunting or roseate spoonbill. But he says they're his favorite because they're the boldest and bravest--they're the first back to the feeder when

he's refilled it, and they are quick to alert other birds to potential predators. Also, he loves that they're always around, that in winter they're often the only bird to be heard when he's out alone on the ski trails.

In reference to the chickadee's bravery, another birder friend, Brian Willson, shared with me a poignant scene he witnessed a couple of years ago when a red-tailed hawk swooped into his yard and carried off a chickadee. In his words: "The scene... left me with an emotional press in my gut just below the breastbone. I can still hear the little bird's enduring cries. With its last breaths, it filled the wintry air with frantic titters: sounding the alarm, sounding the alarm. Hawk, hawk, alarm, alarm..."

Ordinary as they may seem at first, chickadees clearly have a lot more going on than we would expect. Studies have shown that in winter, their brains expand to increase memory. This helps them remember where they've cached extra food, to help them get through hard times. For a bird with a pea brain, this seems extraordinary. It also emphasizes the miracle of evolution that helped this tiny creature adapt to living in an often harsh, cold climate year-round. That extra seed or two may not seem like much, but to a chickadee in the winter it could mean the difference between life and death. During the day the chickadee must be constantly active and feeding in order to maintain its body heat. Its main source of food is conifer seeds, which are high in fat and oil--and which luckily Maine's pines and spruces offer in good supply. The lively chickadee we see darting about the winter woods is not cheerful and perky so much as unable to stop moving for risk of freezing to death.

Overnight, a chickadee can lose up to 15% of its body weight--akin to a 150-pound human losing 20+ pounds. On winter nights, the sleeping chickadee's rate of metabolism decreases so the bird goes into torpor and doesn't freeze to death. Chickadees also survive the long, cold nights of this time of year by huddling together.

In addition to these physiological quirks, chickadees also apparently possess a distinct and relatively decipherable vocabulary of more than fifteen songs and calls. Most of us are familiar with the typical "chick-a-dee-dee-dee" call that gave the bird its name. This call has several meanings depending on the situation, serving as a greeting, an alert about something good (food) or bad (predator), or, when used by a flock, to scare off a predator. No one who has come across a loud flock of chickadees mobbing a hawk can have any doubt about what's going on--they can be very aggressive when they need to be.

One successful way to attract chickadees is to imitate the call of a screech owl. The chickadees appear as if out of nowhere in response to this perceived threat. Birders regularly do this not with the intention of annoying the chickadees, but because many other bird species hang out with chickadee flocks as a way to find food sources more effectively and take advantage of the added protection of an alert flock. So, as happened to me recently on the Ducktrap River Preserve, calling in a group of chickadees may also bring in some of their avian friends, in that case both red- and white-breasted nuthatches and some golden-crowned kinglets.

Many may also recognize the male's loudly whistled, two-note courtship song of "hey sweetie" or "fee-bee" that he sometimes starts singing while snow is still on the ground--apparently his thoughts are never too far from love, no matter how cold the air. A quieter version of this call serves as communication between chickadee pairs, to keep track of one another. A shortened "quirrup" call serves to announce one bird's dominance over another with regards to food or territory; a high-pitched chatter call is a warning; and various other calls help pair bonding, maintain flock cohesiveness as birds move through the forest, or assert flock hierarchy. So it's clearly not all as simple as "chick-a-dee-dee-dee" for these vocal little songbirds that cheer us up all winter. Next time you're out on the trail and the ever-curious chickadees begin to flit around you through the bare trees, watch and listen carefully--you might learn something, and at the very least, they'll bring a smile to your face.

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