

Carolina Chickadee *Poecile carolinensis*



Folk Name: Tom-Tit, Cee-dert, Chickadee

Status: Resident

Abundance: Very Common

Habitat: Forest, parks, wooded neighborhoods

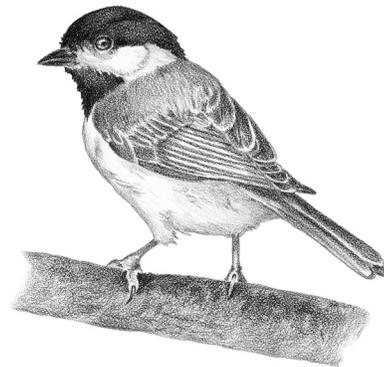
The Carolina Chickadee is one of our most common and beloved birds. It is easy to identify, and it is a regular visitor to parks, backyards, and bird feeders. Anyone who has paid any attention to birds around their neighborhood is familiar with this almost 5-inch black-and-white-faced bird. Its *chick-a-dee-dee* call is heard year-round throughout the Carolina Piedmont. Insects and spiders make up the bulk of its diet, but in winter, it also eats seeds and berries. It has always been described as a hardy, but tame and unsuspecting bird.

The Carolina Chickadee was once commonly known as the “Tom-Tit,” especially by rural residents. Today, few North Carolinians know that the Carolina Chickadee was once the official State Bird of North Carolina. On May 8, 1933, the North Carolina General Assembly officially passed a resolution recognizing the Carolina Chickadee for this high honor. The bill recommending this designation was put forward by the North Carolina Federation of Women’s Clubs after two years of discussion and debate. The Carolina Chickadee beat out the Carolina Wren and the Northern Cardinal. The Carolina Chickadee was recognized as “beneficial to agriculture in that it lives on insects and bugs which are harmful to crops.”

However, a quiet uproar among the state’s legislators immediately ensued after they were informed the Carolina Chickadee was the same bird as the common “Tom-tit.” Many were outraged and concerned about the “undignified” possibility the state would become known as the “Tom-Tit State.” The resolution was repealed a week later, and a full decade passed before another bird would receive any official consideration.

The Carolina Chickadee is one of our best studied birds. It has been the subject of a great deal of scrutiny by professional researchers and amateurs alike. A voucher specimen was collected in Mecklenburg County in 1876 and sent to the Museum of Comparative Zoology at Harvard University for preservation. This specimen is one of the oldest collected in the Central Carolina region and it is still available for examination today.

In 1928, A.L. Pickens, later an ornithologist at Queens College, published a paper titled “Auditory Protective Mimicry of the Chickadee [*sic*],” in the esteemed scientific journal *The Auk*. In it, Pickens claims the Carolina Chickadee successfully mimics the hiss of the copperhead snake. “Now the best imitation of that sound that I heard is the explosive hiss of the brooding Carolina Chickadee



[*sic*]...many have heard the tremendous bluff the diminutive bird makes, and it is sufficient to startle even the initiated who have heard it before, and who may also know that the copperhead is not celebrated as a climber.” Today, this loud hiss is considered part of a defensive “snake display” as opposed to a mimic call.

In *The Chat* in 1945, Elizabeth Clarkson published a detailed account of her attempts to raise a young Carolina Chickadee. Seven babies were hatched in one of her nest boxes on 26 April, and she noticed that, one at a time, they were being killed by a predator: “either a Grackle, Starling or Blue Jay.” On 14 May, she finally rescued the last survivor, named him D.D., and fed him 15 mealworms. The next day he ate 64. By the time he was a month old, he would hang on a perch by one foot and eat mealworms bit-by-bit using the other foot. Clarkson kept a very detailed journal noting feeding times and food items. One day, just before she released him, she had to



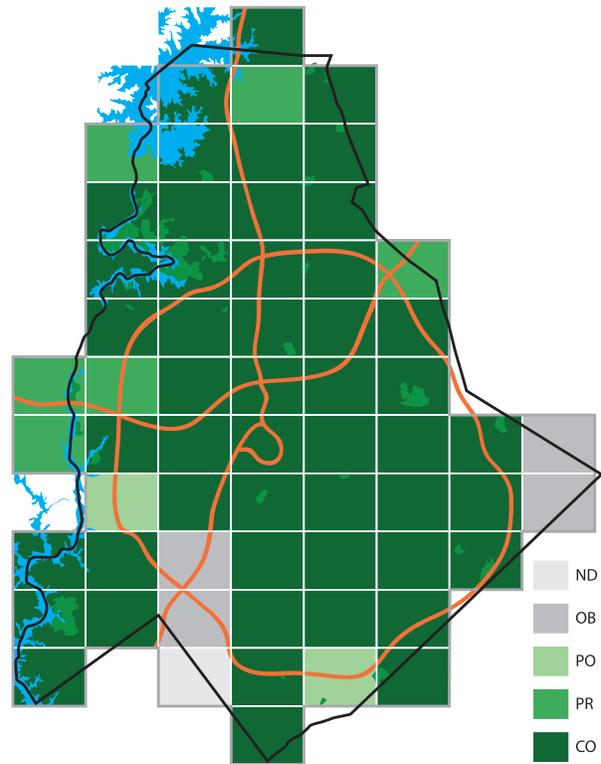
Carolina Chickadee with nesting material. (Jeff Lemons)

feed this tiny bird an astonishing 37 times between 7:10 a.m. and 9:00 p.m.

Starting in 1997, the MCPRD operated a highly successful nest box monitoring program at nature preserves throughout Mecklenburg County. For 20 years, staff built and installed nest boxes for a variety of cavity-nesting species. Chickadees were observed checking out nest boxes in late January and building nests in late February and early March. Initial clutch initiation dates averaged around 11 April, and during one 5-year period, about 75% of Chickadee nests successfully fledged at least one young.

In 2009 in the *Journal of Avian Biology*, Dr. Mark Stanback at Davidson College published a study on nest site competition between Carolina Chickadees and golden paper wasps, an insect that is frequently found taking refuge in nest boxes. He studied boxes in both Iredell and Mecklenburg counties. His study concluded that secondary cavity-nesting species, like the Carolina Chickadee, are successfully able to usurp wasps from nest boxes and then are able to nest and raise their young.

The Carolina Chickadee is one of the top 20 species found each year on both Spring Bird Counts and Christmas Bird Counts in the Central Carolina region.



Mecklenburg County Breeding Bird Atlas:

Nearly Ubiquitous (PR/6, CO/49)