

## Tufted Titmouse *Baeolophus bicolor*



**Folk Name:** Peto Bird, Titmouse, Sugar Bird, Tom-tit

**Status:** Resident

**Abundance:** Very Common

**Habitat:** Forest, parks, wooded neighborhoods

The Tufted Titmouse is a common resident bird that is widely distributed throughout the Piedmont. At 6 ½ inches, it averages almost 1 ¾ inches larger than its relative, the Carolina Chickadee. The titmouse is gray above, white below, and it has rusty-orange flanks. It has a prominent crest on its head that it can raise and lower, and its forehead is black. Like the chickadee, it is often a loud bird and it makes a variety of breeding and scolding calls. Perhaps its best known call is often described as a plaintive *peter-peter-peter*.

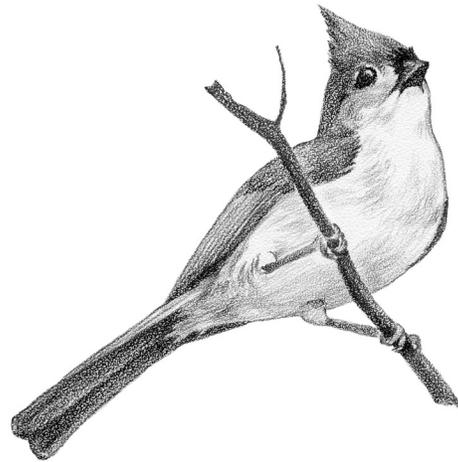
In 1888, oologist R.B. McLaughlin published an early detailed account of the nesting of a Tufted Titmouse, in Iredell County. In it, he writes about the difficulty in finding the nest, the value of these eggs to collectors, and he provides many details of the nesting process. A few excerpts are provided below which, with the exception of the retail value of the eggs, still hold true today:

Apparently much amity subsists between the Tufted Tit and his sociable little kinsman, our Tomtit (*Parus carolinensis*). In fall and winter these two species may often be seen feeding together, and from the perfect harmony and lispings chatter, one would infer that either has an insight into the nature and lingo of his fellow.

The Tufted Titmouse may be called an abundant resident with us, and, at nesting time, one can stroll



Tufted Titmouse. (Will Stuart)



out in the early morning and hear perhaps a score or more of them singing within their respective beats. Perhaps there is no other bird in the South Atlantic States, whose eggs are such *desiderata*, and this owing to the fact that its nest is somewhat difficult to find, and several reasons may be assigned why such is the case.

The bird builds in a natural cavity of a tree, hence the newly cut hole, with chips scattered on the ground beneath, which point like treacherous sign-boards to the home of a woodpecker, are here absent; and, in short, there is not a single outward sign from which the collector can obtain a clue.

About the twelfth of April, the birds may be seen reconnoitering the hollow trees within their accustomed feeding ground, with a view to nesting. It is then that the old leaning sourwood stub, with a hole in the top, possesses such magnetism; and when the top part extends beyond the entrance so as to shelter it from the weather, it is thereby rendered especially seductive.

The female flies down close by the brook and as a first step gathers some dead leaves...

...[S]he gets a supply of green moss and mixes in a modicum of dirt. After she has accumulated the desired amount of such materials, we will find her at the bed of the flying squirrel (*Pteromys volucella*), or some other mammal which collects the thin inner bark of trees, and she does not hesitate to appropriate as much as she needs. Then she is off for the farmer's barn, and any bunch of cornsilks about his granary is used. Again she is over where he curried his horse or butchered his pig, in quest

of hair. ...from the laying of the first egg the sides of the nest are carefully drawn in and the contents hidden.

The bird's boldness about her nest is remarkable. ...She is perfectly cool and demure as you look down upon her seated upon the nest ...she will sometimes sink her claws into the side of the nest, and as she is being lifted will empty the eggs against the tree.

I have seen from five to eight eggs in a nest, but seven is unquestionably the usual number laid in this locality.

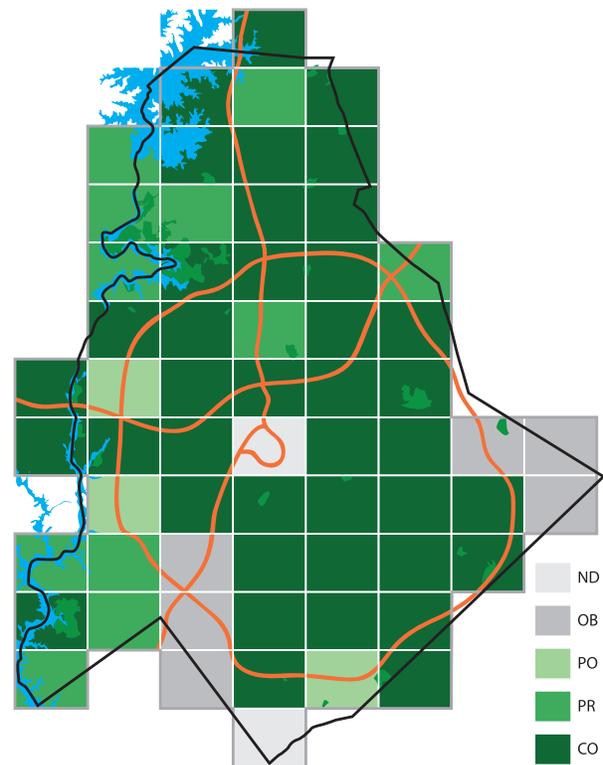
We have many reports of the Tufted Titmouse boldly gathering the fur of animals, including human hair, to help line its nest. These days, they appear quite fond of using raccoon fur. Dwayne Martin reported one instance in Catawba County in May 2014: "Titmouse would grab some hair off the sleeping raccoon and it would wake up slap at the titmouse and go back to sleep. This went on for over an hour. Quite comical."

Tufted Titmice are one of our most frequent visitors to local backyard bird feeders. Unfortunately, when startled and flushed from the feeder, they, like many feeder birds, are occasionally killed after flying into windows. Feeders are often placed adjacent to large windows so the homeowner can get the best views of the birds. Window strikes pose a serious problem at many feeder stations. Over the years, countless solutions have been proposed to solve the "window kill" problem. Recent research and new technology have combined to produce several commercial glass products that significantly reduce window strikes in commercial buildings, but these are expensive and are often not suitable for residential use.

One creative and inexpensive solution to this problem was proposed and tested by Rhett Chamberlain at his home in the Town of Matthews, in the late 1950s. Chamberlain attached an oversized pair of "owls eyes" to the inside of his picture window. He created them from two discs of bright yellow cardboard about 2 inches in diameter with 1-inch-diameter black discs glued in the

center. He tested them for 3 months and had no window strikes and noted several birds bank swiftly away from the window after they approached. After his experiment, he concluded the following: "Of course, there is no proof that there is any association of the spots with an owl. It is possible that only an obstruction is registered and that any equally conspicuous object of any form would serve as well."

The Tufted Titmouse is one of the top 25 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/11, CO/40)*