

Backyard Birding

... with Gail T. Whitehurst

Backyard Birders! We are eagerly awaiting news from you. The winter season of 1980-81 was a good one for the northern finches in the Raleigh area. Did you have an unusually large number of Evening Grosbeaks, Purple Finches, and Pine Siskins at your feeders? How about Red Crossbills? Perhaps you had an unusual visitor—a lingering summer resident or transient which found your backyard so inviting that he stayed with you a period of time.

What interesting or amusing behavior did you observe at the feeders or birdbaths? For instance, we have a hanging feeder made from a coconut shell. Filled with a mixture of cornmeal, suet, and peanut butter, it was intended for Northern Orioles (they need something more substantial than Kool-Ade or sugar water). Not only do a pair of orioles come to this feeder, but also numerous small birds (chickadees, titmice, nuthatches, and wrens) and a Red-bellied Woodpecker and a Common Flicker. It is fantastic, and a bit comic, how these larger birds manage to cling to the feeder as they wrap themselves around it. This is the one time when one can see clearly the red belly of the woodpecker.

Sauna—Scandinavian Style

One sub-freezing morning, we poured boiling water in the birdbath, to melt the ice. Shortly thereafter, we observed several Pine Siskins sitting on the rim and apparently bathing in the hot steam that arose as they were going through elaborate grooming rituals.

Unusual Winter Visitor

Our thanks to Helen E. Myers of Lenoir, N.C., for telling us about a male Rose-breasted Grosbeak that spent the winter season of 1979-80 at her feeders. She relates: "On December 10 a male Rose-breast came to a feeder in my yard. It's feathers were ruffled. It was ravenous. It sat in the feeder and ate sunflower seed for thirty minutes, before it was frightened away by a pigeon. I did not see it again for some time. . . . On January 9 I spotted him at a feeder. Almost every day from then until April 12 he fed at one of my feeders or half a block away at my sister's, Mary May. When I saw him on January 9 he had improved. His feathers were well groomed. It was really great to have this unusual visitor."

More on Bathing Under a Hose

On October 5, 1980, as I was watering shrubbery in my yard, I noticed a male Red-breasted Nuthatch perched about 8 feet away in a small poplar tree. I stooped down and remained as still as possible. Shortly, he flew to the ground within 2 feet of me and into

the spray from the hose. He had a lengthy shower then flew back to the perch in the poplar and proceeded to fluff and preen. This is the only experience I have had with a wild bird in the act of bathing from a hand-held hose.—ADAIR TEDARDS, Route 4, Box 157, Easley, S.C. 29640

The Tufted Titmouse

“Peter, Peter, Peter,” comes the bold, loud call of the small, gray bird. A little farther away, another bird answers the call, saying “Peter” four times. I have heard this call from earliest childhood spent in the mountains of North Carolina. I hear it daily around my home in Raleigh and have heard it on visits to the coast. What is the name of the bird that calls so frequently in woodland and suburb, field and forest across the Carolinas? He is that lively and, seemingly intelligent, little mouse-gray bird with large black eyes, a crest, a white belly, and patches of burnt orange on his flanks or the sides, known to all of us as the Tufted Titmouse. He is a member of a large family of little birds, including our Carolina Chickadee, which are known in England as “tits.” Many birders think this family contains the smartest of all our perching birds, and my experiences and observations of them would make me tend to agree.

The titmouse is quite common everywhere and a familiar bird at feeding stations where he comes for suet and sunflower seeds. Closer observation and even a personal acquaintance with a titmouse has revealed to me some delightful traits of personality, which I should like to share with others. That little crest of his is usually quite erect, but when the bird is very angry or frightened, it lies flat across his head, making his large, round eyes appear even larger. His feet and toes are blue-gray in color—those of first-year birds, quite blue. He is an acrobat, equally as agile and at home swinging upside-down as upright. He can perch on the side of a tree—head up, head down, or sideways. He is perpetual motion all day long.

Some years ago, the two pairs of titmice that came to my feeders decided to join the growing group of semi-tame birds that had come to accept me, my binoculars and, more specifically, my handouts of birdfood. Quite by accident, I noticed that they were flying down to snatch the shelled-out peanuts we had been tossing out to entice a young squirrel near. In no time at all, all four titmice came to expect a peanut or two every time they found me outside. At first they would fly to the nearest perch and, holding the peanut in one foot, wham it to pieces with their beaks and eat the broken bits. Soon they demanded more, which they took away and hid—in an old pine cone, a crack or crevice in the bark of a tree, in the leaves or a clump of grass on the ground. As they became less fearful, they would hide their nuts around the house—on window ledges, under shingles on the roof, anywhere they could find a niche large enough to stash the nut. Once, one hid a nut in a large hole in a stump, but the nut still showed. Another titmouse, catching sight of it, went to the nut and pounded it out of sight. The colder the day, the more nuts the little birds will take and the faster they find hiding places. They will find some of these nuts again in the course of wanderings over the trees and yard, but most will be found by other small birds and, more likely, by squirrels, chipmunks, and mice, whose keen sense of smell will locate the food.

Now all birds are nervous and always on the alert for danger, but some are more so than others. The titmouse, when appearing all absorbed in eating, drinking, or hiding food, is keeping his eyes and ears open at all times. His little head is turning every second and those big eyes are searching everywhere—the ground below, the sky above, the trees and shrubs around him. He can be gone in a flash. He has a great deal of curiosity, just has to know what is going on in the world about him and is first on the scene if a cat or strange bird appears. Once he recognizes the person who hands out food, he wastes no time letting his presence be known. I cannot ignore our four titmice. If I should pretend not to see them, they come closer and closer, squeaking and squealing, scolding and calling. If I still do not come up with the nut, they will fly at my face and around my head



as if to say, "Notice me, here I am. I want my nut, now!" Because of this behavior, I am certain that these are the same birds coming from year to year. However, birds learn so quickly from one another, it is possible for replacements to have occurred.

Like all birds, titmice have their own special territories, land to which they lay claim and on which other titmice must not intrude. During the fall and winter, they relax a bit on the boundary lines, but in late winter and early spring, some downright ugly squabbles can develop when one pair or the other steps over the line. One pair has ownership of the front yard and the woods across the street; the other holds the back yard and all the land extending some two blocks back to a creek. The feeders around the house attract both pairs and things get rough should all four show up at the same time. The call, "Peter, peter," becomes a warning. If not heeded, another call, impossible to describe, is given. In effect it says, "You are intruding on my territory, leave now!" Perhaps the invaders will leave, perhaps not. If they choose to stay and dispute the claim, quite a hassle may ensue. There is much squealing and chasing and the fight is on. The titmice go at each other feet first. They may meet in midair and thrust their feet forward, wings beating rapidly to hold them up. Generally, they come down to the ground. Sometimes, with toes locked together, they roll about on the ground, kicking and pecking and squealing until one gives up and beats a hasty retreat. After such a fight, the four titmice will flit wildly from shrub to shrub and tree to tree with much squealing and scolding. Eventually, tempers cool and the birds split, going deeper into their own territories. I have never seen one of these birds really hurt the other, but they seem to have established dominance and the bird out of place departs.

But they will return. However, future visits will be made when one pair has assured itself that the other is nowhere near. Ofttimes they utter a soft call as though awaiting a response and if no answer is given, back they come to the forbidden feeder. I recall an instance when the male of the backyard pair was singing loudly telling the world that he was marking off his boundary lines. The male of the frontyard pair was making an

attempt to slip in to the seed feeder. The intruder gave out with the softest of calls as though he were trying to sound far away. It must have fooled the other bird, for he soon flew away.

Only twice have I known of a titmouse nest in or near my yard. Once, a pair had a nest in the metal pipe serving to hold up a basketball goal in a neighbor's yard. However, they did not have any luck as a pair of House Sparrows found the place and harassed them so that they left; the House Sparrows took over. Another time, some years ago, a pair built a nest in a birdhouse made from an old Chlorox bottle. The hole was too small for the sparrows to enter. It took the female titmouse many days to build the nest. She carried in a great deal of moss from the woods and creek banks. I wasn't certain when she began to incubate the eggs, but it was a very long time before I was aware that the young had hatched. Before entering the nest, whether to feed the babies or just check on them, the parent would perch on a nearby twig and give out a single, soft call note. The young birds stayed much longer in the nest than do American Robins or Cardinals I have watched. When they were ready to come out, they could fly well. I was amazed to note that they returned to the nest at night for several days after they made the first trip out. Long after the nest had been abandoned, I took down the bottle and opened it. To my surprise, I found two nests, the one on the bottom with two eggs in it. No wonder it was such a long time from the building of the nest until the eggs hatched! Apparently the first clutch was infertile, or perhaps had been allowed to get cold.

Since that time, I have not found the nests of my two pairs of titmice, but I always know when the females are incubating as the males come alone for handouts. I presume that they take something to the females on the nest. I can tell when the eggs have hatched, because then the two birds come together, again. This time, they refuse the hard peanuts, but want the soft balls of cornmeal and peanut butter I feed the other birds. They come for this several times during the day, but spend most of their time gathering small insects to feed the young. As with the other nesting birds I feed, the parents use my food as a filler for hungry mouths, or perhaps grab a bite for themselves to renew the spent energy used in raising a family. When the little ones are fledged, they accompany their parents for a snack now and then. Sometimes one of the little ones will catch on to this easy method of food-getting and come take some on its own. Mostly, though, they flit and frolic through the tree tops or hunch down on some twig, wings aquiver, begging to be fed by the parents. It seems an incredibly short time before they are on their own and gone. The older birds return for a nut now and then during the late spring and summer, but they feed mostly on the abundant insect life. During the molting season, when they are tired and uncomfortable, they come more often for an easy meal.

The first cold winds in the fall bring the titmice back to the feeders and for my nuts. I can always tell when a cold front is on the way by the stepped-up activity of the titmice. If I am indoors, then they come for sunflower seeds and can empty a feeder in short order. They hide the seeds in the same manner as they do with the nuts. While they learn much, they never seem to realize that there will always be food here and no need to store some away. It is one of those instinctive things they do which is built into the very fiber of their being.

The Tufted Titmice, along with the Carolina Chickadees, are very alert to all that goes on in their tree-top world. They become very agitated during spring and fall migration when the many small warblers invade their domain. Probably such an invasion of other small birds, all insect eaters, frightens my little friends. They must fear a wholesale loss of all their choice food. Like the Mockingbird after a flock of Cedar Waxwings in his favorite pyracantha bush, the titmice intend to drive the newcomers away as quickly as possible. They will accompany these warblers (or kinglets, creepers, and

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Roberta Blue, Dick Repasky, Tim Stamps, and Jay Carter. The sparrow was flushed five times from a small field in Longleaf Pine (*Pinus palustris*)—Turkey Oak (*Quercus laevis*) woods. It then perched in a small oak and was positively identified by all observers. The field has vegetated with broomsedge (*Andropogon* sp.) and dead weeds.

On 7 February 1979, a Grasshopper Sparrow appeared in the yard of Marion Jones in Pinehurst, Moore County, N.C. It was seen there irregularly through 17 March. Recognizable photographs were taken by Tom Howard. This bird was in very atypical habitat. The yard was forested with pines, and evergreen shrubbery was around the house and patio. Some old fields with broomsedge were a few hundred yards away, but appeared too sparsely vegetated to be good habitat. The sparrow was first noticed during a snow and ice storm on 7 February. It fed with other ground-feeding species on a concrete patio where birdseed had been scattered. Later it came when the feeding area was less crowded, and was often alone. Although it preferred to feed on the floor of the patio, it also took seed spread on a patio bench that sat next to the house. The bird normally appeared first under the bench and gradually moved to seeds on the concrete, seldom going more than 5 or 10 feet from the bench and evergreen shrubbery. Sometimes, especially if the sun was out, it hopped up on the bench and sat quietly for a few minutes. It was seen in a tree only once, and never on nearby pole feeders.

Although the Grasshopper Sparrow seen in November 1978 may have been a late migrant, the one in February 1979 was undoubtedly a winter storm refugee. It is noteworthy that the latter bird lingered in atypical habitat after the severe weather passed. The Grasshopper Sparrow may winter in the Sandhills more commonly than the three records indicate, but until there are more published records, it must be considered very rare in the winter months.

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nuthatches) from tree to tree until they are well out of the range considered by the titmice as their own property and hunting grounds.

The most interesting reaction to strangers from the sky, however, is the way the titmice respond to hawks. Two kinds of hawks may turn up in our area, mostly in fall and winter. The large hawks, buteos, such as the Red-tailed, pose little threat to the bird life. Except for Blue Jays and crows, their passage goes virtually unnoticed by the small birds. But that other kind of hawk, the accipiter, such as a Sharp-shinned or Cooper's, which prey on birds, causes panic and instant silence. Now how these little birds know the difference in the hawks, even when it may be very high in the sky, beats me. But they do know! I have learned to look for a sharpie when all of a sudden a titmouse lets out with the highest, thinnest shriek it can make. Everything lets out with a cry of alarm and dives for the nearest cover. In a second or two following the alarm and great disappearing act, sure enough, here comes the little hawk flying over. Sometimes it is high; sometimes at tree-top level. It flies so fast and sure, even through the trees, that one cannot help but admire it. The grace and agility of the hawk, however, is unappreciated by the little birds who fear it so. Should a bird find itself unable to reach good cover, it simply "freezes" to the twig on which it is perched.

Once I was standing under a dogwood tree, tossing nuts to my titmouse friends when the Sharp-shinned Hawk flew over, landed in the top of a nearby sweetgum tree and proceeded to scan the area for his dinner. The alarm had been given by the titmouse I was feeding at the moment. He was afraid to move from his perch over my head. I watched him as he sat so still; not a feather ruffled, not a muscle moved. His eyes were

fixed on that hawk. Perhaps the hawk saw me or decided that no easy prey was in sight. He left his perch and flew swiftly away. The moment he took off, the titmouse over my head let out some of the most terrified screams (soft, high, and thin) I have ever heard. He “cried” like this from the time the hawk left its perch until it was long gone—perhaps a full minute. He continued to sit on his perch, immobile, for some minutes longer. It was as though he had seen the most horrible sight in his life and he could hardly stand it. The other birds had come out of hiding and begun to feed again for some time before the little titmouse could shake off the terrible fear of what he had seen.

Nine times out of ten, when danger appears on the scene, be it hawk or cat, the titmouse is the first bird to see it and alert the others. The Blue Jay, quite vocal about cats, buteos, owls, and crows, rarely emits a sound when the Sharp-shin flies over, but dives into the nearest shrubbery. The titmouse is usually the last bird to resume normal activity when an accipiter has passed by, keeping a sharp eye on the sky and tree-tops lest it should double back.

Little birds, such as titmice, chickadees, and wrens, have a rather short life span. Few, if any, would die of old age, for life is full of danger. There are animal predators, disease, parasites, injury, and air rifles to snuff out their lives. Only the strong and alert survive.

Knowing these titmice has enriched my life immeasurably. Sometimes, they light on a branch so near to me that I could reach out and touch them—not really, for they would be gone in a flash. I wonder if, perhaps, I might coax one of them to take a nut from my hand. I do not really want to try this, for it is not wise to let a wild bird become too tame, for its own safety. All people do not love birds and some might even become frightened if a little fellow suddenly landed on head, shoulder, or arm to look for food. Others might harm them in some way. While I believe these four titmice recognize me, individually, as a separate person, all birds do not seem to distinguish one human from another. The reason I think my titmice friends do know me is that they come close and beg for nuts even when I encounter them some distance from my yard—in the woods, along the creek, or on a street some blocks away.

These four little birds have brought me much pleasure as they go about the business of living free. I have learned much about them, and hope to discover more. Since they are a fairly common bird all over the Carolinas and are easily attracted to feeders, I commend to all who read this—find and make a friend of a titmouse. You will never regret it.—GTW