

# BIRD OF THE MONTH

## FAITHFUL WINTER VISITORS



*"The chickadee is a symbol of faithfulness. It lives the year around in the same region. It never deceives its human friends, as so many birds do, by changing its coat and colors. In the summer, to be sure, it is not much seen. .... But with wintry blasts, time the others go south, the Chickadee begins to be noticed. Then there comes a time when it is almost the only thing to lend a touch of life and a note of gladness to a bleak outdoors.*

**William Athenton Dupuy**  
**Our Birds, Friend and Foe, 1925**

Now that fall has arrived and the excitement of spotting the many migrants that pass through the Flathead on the way to their winter homes is mostly over, it's time to start thinking about buying Audubon sunflower seeds and cleaning our bird feeders. Much as I enjoy these last fleeting days of good weather, I have to admit that I'm looking forward to hearing that the bears have hibernated so that I can safely welcome some old friends back to our feeders. When I first started feeding birds years ago, a Black-capped Chickadee was our very first visitor and they and the other species of chickadees in the valley have become regular visitors.

Chickadees are among the most frequent and loyal feeder visitors. They are also some of the tamest, often waiting patiently on a nearby twig while I refill feeders and water. As members of the Paridae Family, chickadees are closely related to titmice. Both are small, energetic, social birds with short conical, pointed bills. The species with crests are titmice and those without crests are chickadees. Our area is home to four species of chickadees: Black-capped, Mountain, Chestnut-backed, and Boreal. Last winter we were fortunate enough to have Black-capped, Mountain and Chestnut-backed visit our feeders regularly.

All chickadees have strong legs and short, stout bills which are put to good use in feeding behaviors such as hanging upside down at the tip of a branch eating a bud or holding a seed with their feet while pounding it open. Chickadees also store food in temporary caches. Sometimes the food is cached and retrieved almost immediately, as when they move many sunflower seeds from a feeder and hide them in nearby tree bark. In this case, the cache is used just to help the bird get a large portion of the available food for itself. At other times the caches are more long-term, such as when seeds are stored in the fall for use later in the winter. This behavior

which involves large spatial memory is crucial in their survival in our harsh winters. Also key to their ability to survive extreme weather conditions is their ability to go into a state of regulated hypothermia, lowering their body temperature from a day time temp of 107.6 ° to a night temperature of 86 °. While in this state of torpidity, they can still fly (somewhat weakly) if the need to escape a predator arises.

All four kinds of chickadees found in the Flathead have dark caps, black throat patches, and white cheeks and prefer forest habitats. Males, females and young all look alike. All are smaller than sparrows and very acrobatic when feeding. Black-capped have buffy sides and Mountain can be distinguished from Black-capped by the thin white eye-brow and grayer flanks. Chestnut-backed is the most brightly colored chickadee and has a rich reddish-brown back and reddish brown flanks while Boreal has a smaller white cheek patch and is more subdued in color. Boreal is the shyest and the least often seen of the Rocky Mountain chickadees.

All chickadees are cavity nesters and prefer natural holes such as those created when a large branch breaks off at the trunk or those made by woodpeckers, but they will use wooden nest boxes as well. This nest is also used in the winter as an escape from the cold with several birds huddling together to keep warm during cold snaps.

Currently, all chickadee species are plentiful in our area but deforestation and development could threaten their habitat, so urge your friends and neighbors to save those trees and snags and become bird watchers!

*Information for this article was gathered from The Sibley Guide to Bird Life and Behavior, eNature.com, and [www.naturepark.com/chickade.htm](http://www.naturepark.com/chickade.htm)*

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