

Tufted Titmouse

Baeolophus bicolor



The gray crest is a distinctive trait of the Tufted Titmouse. As its scientific name suggests, it essentially two-colored: a soft silvery-gray on top and white below, but there are blotches of a pale orange or peach on the sides.

Its short, black, powerful bill is used to crack seeds and open snail shells, and the black eye-ring surrounding the black eye makes the eye look particularly large for a small bird. A black patch just above the bill makes the bill look very stout. The juvenile looks like the adult except its forehead is gray instead of black.

Titmice are year-round residents in Corkscrew but are most often observed from January through April when they are courting and establishing nesting territories.

Tufted Titmice flit from branch to branch of the forest canopy looking for food, often in the company of other species including nuthatches, gnatcatchers, vireos, warblers, and woodpeckers.

Their diet is mainly insects in the summer, including caterpillars, beetles, ants, wasps, stink bugs, and treehoppers, as well as spiders and small snails. Titmice also eat seeds, nuts, and berries, including acorns and beech nuts. Experiments with Tufted Titmice indicate they always choose the largest seeds they can when they forage.

When they find large seeds, such as sunflower seeds from bird feeders,



titmice typically hold the seed with their feet and hammer it open with their bills, *above*. In fall and winter, they hoard the shelled seeds in bark crevices.

Acrobatic foragers, titmice often hang upside down or sideways as they investigate air plants, undersides of branches, and leaf clusters. During the summer and fall, they rip open the caterpillar folds in Alligator Flag leaves in order to extract the caterpillar.

Tufted Titmice breed from early April to early July. Once a pair gets together, they mate for life.

Tufted Titmice nest in cavities, but they can't excavate them on their own. So they use natural holes and old nest holes made by woodpecker species, including large species such as Pileated Woodpecker and Northern Flicker.

Additionally, Tufted Titmice also nest in artificial structures including nest boxes, fence posts, and metal pipes.

Nest building usually begins in April, but sometimes the titmice start carrying odd leaves and trash into holes as early as March.

Inside the cavity, the nest is cup-shaped. Construction starts with damp leaves which pack nicely and don't crumble; then, moss, grasses, and bark

strips are added. Finally, titmice line the cup with soft materials such as hair, fur, wool, and cotton, sometimes plucking hairs directly from living mammals.

Naturalists examining old nests have identified raccoon, opossum, dog, fox squirrel, rabbit, horse, cow, cat, mouse, woodchuck, and even human hair in titmouse nests. Nest construction takes 6 to 11 days.

The typical clutch size is from three to seven eggs and there is typically just one brood per year. Incubation lasts 12-14 days and it's

another 15-16 days before the chicks are ready to fledge. The male feeds the female from courtship through egg hatching, and then both parents feed the chicks.

Titmice are very vocal birds and quickly respond to the sounds of agitation in other birds, coming close to investigate or joining a group of birds mobbing a predator such as a snake, hawk, or owl.

The song is usually described as a whistled *peto-peto-peto*. However, they make a variety of different sounds.

Another call is similar to *tree-tree-tree* where each note has the same tone and duration. They also chatter with a variety of soft noises.

Titillating Titmouse Tidbits

- The oldest known wild Tufted Titmouse lived to be 13 years 3 months old, but the average life span in the wild is about two and a half years.
- *Titmouse*: *Tit* originated from the old Icelandic word *titr* which meant something small. *Mouse* is a corruption of the old Anglo-Saxon word *mase*, which translates to a kind of bird. So literally, a titmouse is a small kind of bird.

Listen to the sounds of titmice at:

www.youtube.com/watch?v=CVO4X6Ham4M

www.fcps.edu/islandcreekes/ecology/Birds/Tufted%20Titmouse/tutiW.wav