



# Thorndon Birdlife

## September 2024

The coal tit (*Periparus ater*) is a small passerine bird in the tit family Paridae. It is a widespread and common resident breeder in forests throughout the temperate to sub-tropical Palearctic, including North Africa. The black-crested tit is now usually included in this species. The current genus name is Ancient Greek *peri* plus the pre-existing genus *Parus*. The specific *ater* is Latin for "dull black".

A number of coal tit subspecies are distinguished, the differences in colouration are quite pronounced in some of them, while their differences in size are more subtle. Coal tits from Asia are larger in colder regions, those from further west however are not, as the birds from the uplands around the Mediterranean are larger than those from northern Europe. Across its range, tail length in relation to body length increases along a cline running from southwest to northeast. The coal tit is an all-year resident throughout almost all range, making only local movements in response to particularly severe weather; only the Siberian birds have a more regular migration.



Coal tit (*Britannicus*) British



Coal tit (*hibernicus*) Irish

It is a small tit of coniferous woodland, although it can be found in parks and gardens where there are conifer trees. It nests in holes in trees, but is just as happy to use nestboxes. Coal tits are active feeders, hunting out insects and spiders among the smaller branches and leaves of trees in woodlands. But they are also well-adapted to gardens and towns and will visit bird tables and feeders where they will take and store food for eating later, so it is worth watching them between June and December to see what they do with the seeds they take from feeders.

When caching, Coal tits tend to regularly dart back and forth to the feeder over a short period of time. This is because their beaks are so small that they can only carry one seed at a time, as well as the fact that they take each food item to a separate location, which is known as scatter hoarding.

British Coal Tits use broadleaf woodland to a greater extent than their continental cousins and, as a consequence, have slightly larger bills. In Ireland, where there are fewer conifers, Coal Tit bills are even larger. Small differences in bill size between individuals using different habitats may seem inconsequential. The Irish race *P. a. hibernicus* is distinguished from *P.a.britannicus* by the pale sulphur-yellow cheeks, breast and belly. It also has a paler rump (due to light fringes of the upper tail coverts) and a larger bill than its relatives from Britain.

The Coal tit is 10 - 11.5 cm in length and has a distinctive large white nape spot on its black head. The head, throat and neck of the adult are glossy blue-black, setting off the off-white sides of the face, tinged grey to yellow depending on subspecies, and the brilliant white nape; the white tips of the wing coverts appear as two wing bars. The underparts are whitish shading through buff to rufous on the flanks. The bill is black, the legs lead-coloured and iris dark brown. The young birds in juvenile plumage are duller than the adults, lacking gloss on the black head, and with the white of nape and cheeks tinged with yellow. While searching for food, coal tit flocks keep contact with incessant short *dee* or *see-see* calls. The species' song – if "song" it can be called – is a strident *if-he, if-he, if-he*, heard most frequently from January to June, but also in autumn. The song resembles that of the great tit, but much faster and higher in pitch like a bicycle pump. One variant of this song ends with a sharp *ichi*.

A favourite nesting site is a hole in a rotting tree-stump, often low down, and the nest is deep within the hole; holes in the ground, burrows of mice or rabbits, chinks between the stones in walls, old nests of *Pica* magpies or other large birds, and squirrel dreys are also occupied. The materials, moss, hair and grass, are closely felted together, and rabbit fur or feathers added for lining. Seven to eleven red-spotted white eggs are laid, usually in May; this species breeds usually once per year.

Coal tits typically live for around two years. However, the current longevity record for this species is nine years and eight months.

**Garden sightings:** Tawny owl, Green woodpecker, Great-spotted woodpecker, Song thrush, Marsh tit.

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