



# Confiding Cutie

Text and photos by Steve Maslowski

**H**owever flawed you or I might be as human beings, chances are we'll be just fine in the eyes of a Black-capped Chickadee. Few birds regard the human figure with as much approval. In fact, if we stay still for a few moments, especially near a feeder, we'll be almost as good a place to perch as any other twig or stump in the forest.

Maybe the birds realize that we are too lumbering to catch them. Perhaps their tameness is really a manifestation of focus and intensity.

Facing deadly cold temperatures and long, forbidding nights in their northern habitat, Black-capped Chickadees' essential concern is food. Less-than-necessary cautions such as fear of humans might have been tossed to the wind.

In contrast, Carolina chickadee, the Black-capped's look-alike cousin that lives farther south, acts considerably more aloof. I have lost count of the number of times I served as a perch for Black-cappeds, but never once has a Carolina trusted — or ignored — me.

Any of the four chickadee species that commonly visit back yards — Black-capped, Carolina, Mountain and Chestnut-backed — are dependable fixtures at bird feeders. About 90 percent of feeders in chickadee range receive their visits.

Chickadees are not especially picky; they'll eat suet, peanuts, peanut butter and, of course, sunflowers. For a great many people, including this author, chickadees are birdwatching bread and butter.

After perhaps rejecting a sunflower or two, the tiny 10-gram bird takes one that



meets its parameters and flits to a nearby perch. It pins the sunflower against the branch with both feet and, like a miniature jackhammer, pecks away the shell to reveal the kernel.

Intently and enthusiastically, the chickadee continues pecking and eating the kernel, tearing off shell as needed. When done, the little dynamo looks at the feeder and drops any seed remnants from its feet.

This carefree disposal always reminds me of the way that people used to toss trash from car windows before Lady Bird Johnson joined the Keep America Beautiful campaign in 1965. As far as I'm concerned, the chickadee serves the spokesman of the Keep America Cute campaign.

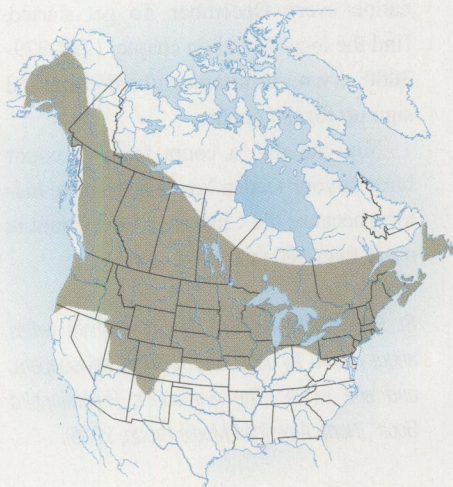
A Black-capped might pull dozens of sunflowers from your feeder on a cold winter day. Not all the seeds will be consumed then and there. Many get hidden for later consumption — up to a month later.

During warm spells, a chickadee requires considerably fewer calories and visits the feeder less often. In the coldest weather, a Black-capped needs the caloric equivalent of 250 sunflowers seeds; this drops to less than 100 as temperatures rise.

Chickadee authority Margaret Brittingham of Pennsylvania State University in University Park also finds that, for the most part, Black-cappeds can survive nicely without feeders. Generally only about 20 percent of their food comes from them. The other 80 percent consists of insects, spiders (including their eggs) and seeds gleaned in acrobatic searches over and under every branch in the forest.

Survival rates of birds with access to feeders is not much better than that of birds without access, except in areas or years with severe winters. In extreme conditions, feeders enhance survival significantly.

Some birders think that the low dependence on feeders suggests that chickadees regard feeders in the same way they



■ Year-round range



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regard most of their other food sources: as temporary. The versatile, hungry hunters historically have looked for new food opportunities. Only very recently have they encountered a steady, reliable single source like a feeder. Old habits die hard.

In many ways, chickadees provide ideal subjects for backyard study for Brittingham and others, because the birds are nonmigratory and spend their entire lives in a rather small area. Nesting territories usually measure less than 20 acres and often as small as six.

During winter, little flocks develop and range a bit wider but rarely cover even 40 acres. This means that more than a dozen winter flocks can inhabit a single square mile.

A few decades ago, Susan M. Smith, a biology professor in the Northeast, learned by watching chickadees banded with color codes that a chickadee winter flock is not a rigid grouping. Flocks generally range in size from three to six birds.

At its heart is a mated pair that remains

loyal to its territory. That pair might be joined by some young of the year (probably not their own) and maybe some floaters — birds that wander in and out of a number of flocks in an area.

In each flock, a floater might have a different position in the pecking order. These birds also have a chance to leapfrog in status and replace one of the mated pair, should a loss occur. Floaters not only have the unusual ability to roam between territories, they also have the remarkable ability to vault to top dog.

Across much of its range, Black-capped Chickadee cohabits its territory with another chickadee species. Along the West Coast, there is Chestnut-backed Chickadee. In the Sierras and Rockies, there is Mountain Chickadee.

In the East, Black-capped and Carolina stay separate in an interesting arrangement. The two share a border along their respective ranges for more than 1,000 miles

from New Jersey through Kansas. Black-capped live to the north, the Carolinas to the south. Tough to tell apart, the best identifiers — besides range — are their songs.

Sometimes the two species interbreed. What keeps them from melding into one? Recent studies have shown that, on average, a mixed pair produces a smaller number of young, and the offspring have less reproductive vigor. Over time, hybrid blood simply and reliably gets overwhelmed by the more robust purebred.

Whatever cute, perky and tough chickadee species visits your yard, it's probably popular. All the birds ask is a little serving of seeds or suet. Many of them, especially Black-capped, accept us no matter who we are. How often does that happen? **WB**

*Steve Maslowski and his brother Dave operate Maslowski Wildlife Productions out of Cincinnati. They regularly contribute photographs to WildBird.*