

Bue Tit *Cyanistes caeruleus*

L11-12cm Everyone with a bird-table and peanut-feeder in the garden will have been visited by Blue Tits, the best known of all the colourful winter acrobats, that go on to occupy garden nestboxes in the spring. Males and females are alike and juveniles are paler, with yellowish cheeks. Winter visitors from the Continent are brighter than resident birds. They are mainly insectivorous, and breeding is synchronised to the huge numbers of Winter Moth caterpillars that appear in spring, when the insatiable appetite of the young is at its peak; a single brood may eat about 12,000 caterpillars. The female makes a cosy nest of moss, feathers, hair and cobwebs, either in a nestbox or in a crevice in a tree or wall. Here, in early April, she puts 'all her eggs in one basket' and lays up to 12 eggs in a single brood. Mortality is high at 90% with, on average, only one fledgling surviving the first year. Later in the year, when invertebrates are scarcer, the Blue Tit depends more on nuts, seeds and fat at the bird-table. At this time, it is most numerous in gardens, and becomes the second-most common garden bird after the Blackbird. It has a wide range of clear, high-pitched calls, most commonly 'tse-tse-tse-tsuu'. **Habitat and distribution** A common, mainly woodland, bird, but found in many other habitats throughout the year. Widely distributed throughout Britain and Ireland, with about 3.5 million breeding pairs.

Great Tit *Parus major*

L13.5-15cm This is the largest and most aggressive of the tits and is an agile acrobat on the bird-feeder. The sexes can be separated by the central belly stripe, which in the male is broad and black, and in the female is narrow, uneven and paler; juveniles are altogether paler, with yellow cheeks. Breeding begins in late March, and as well as nestboxes, natural holes in trees and walls (and even mailboxes!) are used as nesting sites. As an omnivore, the Great Tit eats a wide range of food, including vegetable matter, but its main diet, especially in the summer, is caterpillars foraged from the foliage of deciduous trees. It has a wide vocabulary, the most familiar in spring being a loud 'tsee-saw-tsee-saw'. In winter, mixed flocks of tits, Nuthatches and finches roam woodlands, parks and gardens, foraging for food and taking advantage of a greater number of eyes looking out for predators. **Habitat and distribution** Found in woodland, parks and gardens with plenty of vegetation. Occurs throughout Britain and Ireland.

Coal Tit *Periparus ater*

L10-11.5cm The smallest of the true tits, the Coal Tit has a dumpy, greyish-buff body and a striking black-and-white head. It lacks the bright colours of commoner garden tits, although some races, particularly those autumn visitors from the Continent and juveniles, have a slightly yellowish tinge. The white patch on the nape is diagnostic. The slender bill is ideal for probing into conifer cones for insects, which reflects the Coal Tit's preference for coniferous woodland. Its diet is mainly insects, but seeds and fruit are also eaten. It is energetic and fast-moving when foraging, frequently flying to and from bird-tables to hoard food in nearby crevices. When concealed in a treetop, it can be identified by its distinctive, repetitive 'teechu-teechu-teechu' song. The nest is made from moss, hair and fur, built in a crevice, often low down in a tree or wall, or in a nestbox, where a clutch of seven to 12 eggs is laid. An occasional second brood is reared in good summers. **Habitat and distribution** Prefers mainly coniferous woods but is found in all types of woodland, parks and gardens throughout the country.

Long-tailed Tit *Aegithalos caudatus*

L12-14cm Without its tail, the Long-tailed Tit, which is not a true tit, would easily be the smallest of all the British tits. They are most often seen in active parties of up to 20 birds, following each other, skipping from tree to tree in ones or twos, and making contact with a high-pitched 'sree-sree-sree' call. They sometimes visit gardens to feed on peanuts and fat balls. The adult plumage is pink, white and black, quite unlike that of the juvenile, which is much duller and has a shorter tail. In mid-summer, both start a long moult, and by October they appear indistinguishable. Breeding starts early in the year, at the beginning of March, and the nest is a masterpiece that takes up to a month to build. The beautiful dome-shaped nest is made from moss, hair and cobwebs, covered with lichens and lined with around 2,000 soft feathers. It is usually positioned in a thorny shrub or, less often, quite high up in the fork of a tree. Here, up to 12 eggs are laid, well insulated from bad weather. Both parents, often aided by other non-breeding individuals, feed the young. In winter, groups of Long-tailed Tits huddle together for warmth, but mortality can be high and in severe weather, when insect food is scarce, the population may crash by up to 80%. **Habitat and distribution** Woodland fringes, clearings, along hedgerows, in parks and gardens. Widespread, except for the far north and west of Scotland.

