



EC 1583 • September 2006  
\$1.00



# Black-capped Chickadee

*Poecile atricapilla*

by M. Mulanax and N. Allen

**T**he black-capped chickadee is a common North American bird. Chickadees can be seen in small fields collecting seeds and insects. They also feed at the edges of forests. These birds like to visit bird feeders.



## Where they live and why

Black-capped chickadees live in many states and almost everywhere in Oregon except large desert areas. In Oregon, they prefer deciduous woodlands and forests and riparian woodlands along streams. They often feed along the edges of forest openings. Residential areas such as gardens and parks with a variety of trees and shrubs are also good places to find chickadees.

Chickadees are active all year long. In the winter, they sometimes move a short distance to another area with more food. They will move a few miles from forests if necessary. They feed in groups, often made up of two families. Chickadees also form flocks and feed with other kinds of birds. In the spring, they return to their home range.



Photo: Donna Dewhurst, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

You'll often see chickadees perched on branches in yards, parks, and woods.



**Oregon State** | Extension  
UNIVERSITY | Service

*M. Mulanax, student in Fisheries and Wildlife, and Nancy Allen, fisheries and wildlife faculty, Oregon State University.*

## Species description

The black-capped chickadee is a small, gray bird with a white belly. These chickadees are characterized by the black cap on their head, a black throat patch, and a white face. They have a short, tweezer-shape bill for eating seeds and picking insects off twigs and the edges of leaves. They are 4 to 5 inches tall. They vocalize with the song chick-a-dee-dee.

Chickadees start to nest in late winter. First, the male finds an area with food, water, and a nesting site. Then he attracts a mate by singing. As in many animal species, it is the female that chooses her mate.

Next, the couple picks a site to build a nest. They like holes (cavities) in trees. Chickadees will carve a hole in a rotten branch if they cannot find an unoccupied one. Birds such as chickadees and woodpeckers that create their own holes are called primary cavity nesters.

The female uses bark and leaves to make the nest in the cavity. She

lines it with feathers or animal hair. Finally, she lays four to seven eggs. These eggs are white with reddish-brown spots, and they hatch in 10 to 12 days.

Baby birds are called fledglings. Chickadee fledglings are altricial, meaning they are born without feathers. Both parents care for the baby chickadees.

The fledglings learn to fly 12 to 14 days after hatching. They leave the nest after 2 to 3 weeks, but the adults continue to feed them for another 2 to 4 weeks.

Chickadees' favorite foods are insects, especially caterpillars and spiders. Sunflower seeds are another of their favorite foods. In the summer chickadees eat mostly insects, but in winter they will eat seeds and fruit. Chickadees hop around on branches to collect food and will glean insects from the underside of leaves and twigs. In the fall, they store seeds in tree bark and other hiding places to eat later.



## Creating habitat



To attract chickadees to your school area or home, provide feeders with flat bases or perches where the birds can stand. Chickadees like to feed above the ground. They eat a variety of seeds, but especially like sunflower seeds. In fact, many types of backyard birds favor sunflower seeds. If you plant sunflowers and let them go to seed, you probably will attract chickadees and other birds.

Planting a variety of evergreen and deciduous trees and shrubs will provide food and cover. Shrubs that produce berries or nuts are good choices.

Chickadees also need water, especially in the summer. Birdbaths can range from an old trash can lid to a nice decorative birdbath or fountain. It is helpful to place a stick or piece of wood in the water for the birds to stand on. The water should be shallow, and the birdbath surface should

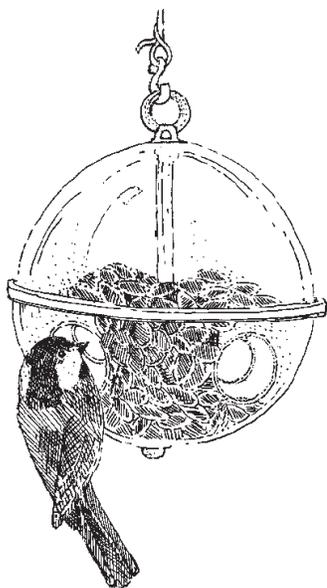


Photo: Donna Dewhurst, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

Planting a variety of trees and shrubs is a good way to attract chickadees.

be rough so the birds can get in and out easily. Chickadees are easy prey for animals such as cats, so it's important to keep feeders and birdbaths out of reach of predators.

Chickadees will use nest boxes that imitate tree cavities. Place a small amount of sawdust in the bottom of the nest box to make it seem more natural. Make sure the entry hole is no larger than  $1\frac{1}{8}$  inch to prevent house sparrows and starlings from nesting in the box. These nonnative, undesirable species compete for nest sites with our native birds.

You can buy nest boxes or make you own. You can download plans from many sites on the Internet such as <http://www.cornwallwildlifetrust.org.uk/nature/birds/birdbox.htm>.

It is a good idea to preserve dead trees because they may already have nest cavities. Dead trees also are home to spiders and insects, favorite foods of chickadees.

Photo: Noah Stryker



Chickadees spend a lot of time perched in trees. That's where they build their nests and look for food.

## Fun facts

-  Chickadees sing their name: *chick a dee-dee-dee.*
-  They can feed while upside down.
-  Chickadees have been known to live as long as 12 years.
-  Baby chickadees learn to fly within 2 weeks after hatching.

## Learn more!

*The Sibley Guide to Bird Life and Behavior.* 2001. Alfred A. Knopf, Inc.  
*The Audubon Society Field Guide to North American Birds, Western Region.* 1977. Alfred A. Knopf, Inc.

Cornell Laboratory of Ornithology.

The Birds of North America.  
[http://bna.birds.cornell.edu/BNA/account/Black-capped\\_Chickadee/SYSTEMATICS.html](http://bna.birds.cornell.edu/BNA/account/Black-capped_Chickadee/SYSTEMATICS.html)

The Cornwall Wildlife Trust. <http://www.cornwallwildlifetrust.org.uk/nature/birds/birdbox.htm>



Oregon  
4-H  
Wildlife  
Stewards

Additional wildlife publications in this series are available on the OSU Extension Service website at <http://extension.oregonstate.edu/catalog/>

© 2006 Oregon State University.

This publication was produced and distributed in furtherance of the Acts of Congress of May 8 and June 30, 1914. Extension work is a cooperative program of Oregon State University, the U.S. Department of Agriculture, and Oregon counties. Oregon State University Extension Service offers educational programs, activities, and materials—*without discrimination based on age, color, disability, gender identity or expression, marital status, national origin, race, religion, sex, sexual orientation, or veteran's status.* Oregon State University Extension Service is an Equal Opportunity Employer.

Published September 2006