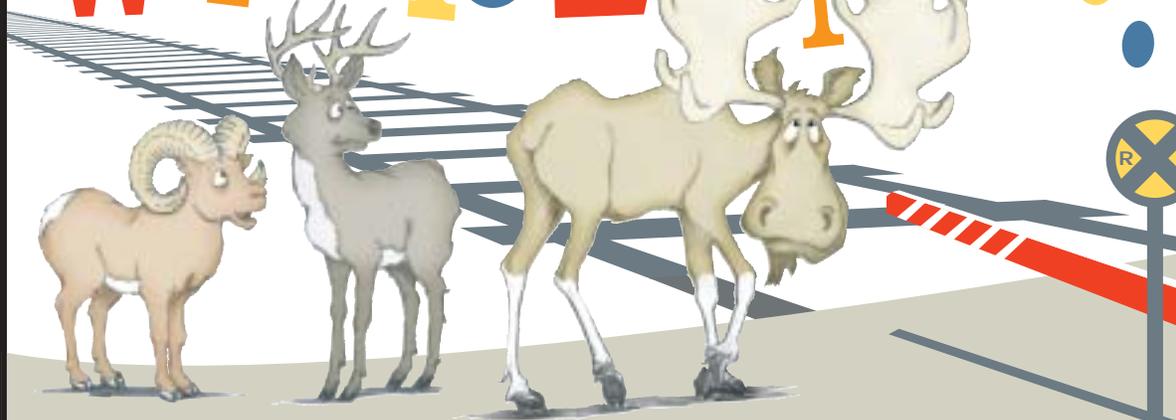


Wildlife Express!



Volume 18

Issue 5

January 2005



photo by Ann Cook©



Let's Look at...

Chickadees

If you have a bird feeder in your yard, chances are you have already met a black-capped chickadee (*Poecile atricapillus*). They are small soft-gray birds with a black cap on their head and a black bib under their chins. They get their name from their call which says “chick-a-dee, dee, dee.”

Black-capped chickadees are found in the northern half of the United States. They like sheltered places better than open spaces. Even though they live in the north, black-capped chickadees do not migrate. Instead, they spend the entire year in the same area. Birds that do this are called “residents.” Residents often eat a variety of foods. This helps them find food in both the summer and winter.

For chickadees, food comes in the form of both plants and animals. In the spring and summer, insects and spiders are what's for dinner. As the weather turns colder, chickadees begin to eat more seeds and berries. A very important winter food is suet (SUE-it). Suet is animal fat. People who feed birds often have suet feeders. Chickadees also find suet on dead animals. Dead animals attract these small birds along with magpies, ravens and eagles. Suet gives chickadees important energy to survive cold winters.

Chickadees are helped in their endless search for food by belonging to a flock in winter. These flocks form in the fall. They are made up of pairs of adults and young chickadees hatched in summer. Most chickadee flocks have six to ten members. Flocks find more food, because there are more birds searching. Members alert the flock to danger as well as food. Chickadee flocks are often joined by other birds such as nuthatches, kinglets and woodpeckers.

In spring, the flock breaks up for the nesting season. Chickadees nest in cavities in trees. A pair will search for rotten places in trees to make a nest hole. Once this is done, the female makes a nest cup out of moss, pine needles or bark strips. This cup is lined with soft materials such as plants and animal fur. Many kinds of fur have been found in chickadee nests including rabbit fur, horse hair and even dog hair!

When the nest is done, the female lays six to eight small eggs. They are white with reddish brown spots. Incubation lasts about 12 days. Baby chickadees are naked and blind when they hatch. But 16 days later, they are ready to leave the nest. That's pretty amazing!

Young chickadees spend about three weeks with their parents. They learn what food to eat and where to find shelter. Then, they travel several miles away to find their own home territory where they will spend the rest of their lives. If you are lucky, that just might be in your backyard!



To Band a Bird

The great wildlife biologist Aldo Leopold once wrote, "To band a bird is to hold a ticket in a great lottery." He banded chickadees and was interested in how long they lived. Chickadee # 65290 was famous in the Leopold family. He lived six years.

Bird banding has allowed us to learn many things about birds. We can learn how long birds live. We can also see where and how far birds migrate. Other banding studies help us learn about the kinds of birds found in different habitats.

Bird bands are made of lightweight metal. They come in different sizes from tiny ones for hummingbirds to large bands for eagles. Each band has its own special number.

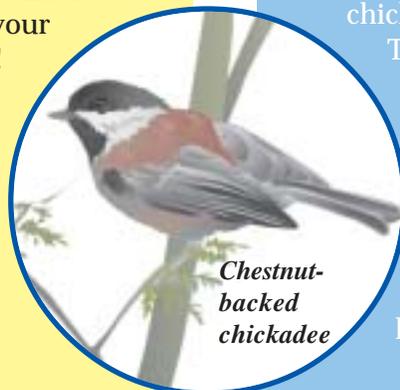
Birds are usually caught in nets. Small songbirds, such as chickadees, are caught using lightweight, soft nets called mist nets. These nets are put up in areas where birds might fly into them. When a bird hits the net, the net wraps around the bird, gently holding it. Biologists carefully take the birds out of the net. Each bird is banded, examined, measured and then released.

If a bird already has a band, biologists write down the number. By researching the band number, a biologist can find out when and where the bird was first banded. They can also find out who put the band on, and if the bird has been caught since the original banding.

If you ever find a bird with a band, you can call the Bird Banding Lab at 1-800-327-BAND. Their staff can give you information about the bird. You will also get a certificate in the mail telling you more about your bird. And you get to keep the band!



Banding a great horned owl.



Chestnut-backed chickadee

Kinfolks

Chickadees are members of the family Paridae (PAIR-a-day). They can be found all over the world. People usually love these birds, because they seem cheerful and friendly. Seven members of this family live in North America. Four of them live in Idaho; they are the black-capped, mountain, chestnut-backed, and boreal chickadee.

Idaho's four chickadee species look alike. All four species have dark caps and bibs. They are all small, grayish and about five inches long. They like sheltered habitat and eat similar foods. All of them have calls that sound like "chick-a-dee, dee, dee."

The black-capped chickadee is the most common Idaho chickadee. You can see it just about anywhere in the state. Spend some time watching a bird feeder. Chances are you will probably see a black-capped chickadee.

Mountain chickadees are also common. They like to live up in the mountains. Ponderosa pine forests are a favorite. Mountain chickadees look like black-capped chickadees except for a black stripe on their face. This gives them a white racing stripe above their eye. In the summer, mountain chickadees check out the tips of branches for spiders and larvae. During winter, they switch to pine seeds. The next time you are in the mountains, listen for the wheezy "chick-a-deez, deez, deez" of the mountain chickadees.

Chestnut-backed chickadees call the Idaho Panhandle home. They have a dark cap and bib, but their back and sides are chestnut-colored. These chickadees are also a little smaller than Idaho's other chickadees. Like the mountain chickadee, the chestnut-backed likes pine and fir forests.

The last is the boreal chickadee. This chickadee is the largest and hardest to find.

They live in forests along the Idaho-Canadian border. Look for a chickadee with a brown cap and black bib. Their slow wheezy "chick-a-deeeee" call will tell you they are nearby.

Chickadees are popular birds to watch. We are lucky to have four in our state.



A magpie fluffing its feathers to beat the chill.

Beating the Chill

Staying warm during Idaho's winters is serious business. Just ask a chickadee. Lots of snow, cold temperatures and winds make life pretty tough. So, how does a half-ounce ball of feathers survive?

Feathers are the chickadees' first defense against the cold. They have a

lot more feathers in the winter than they do in summer. These feathers trap air. The air acts as insulation. You do the same thing. When you put a jacket or sweater on over a shirt, you are insulating your body. By fluffing their feathers, chickadees trap even more air. The bird stays warmer. Chickadees sometimes fluff up so much that they look like round puffy balls.

Eating food with lots of fat is also important. Things like suet, insect larvae and sunflower seeds are high energy foods with lots of fat. These foods are stored as fat in the chickadee's body and help the bird to stay warm at night. By morning, most of the fat is gone, and the chickadee must find more food. Biologists studying chickadees found that one chickadee needs to eat about 150 sunflower seeds every day to survive a normal winter. If it gets below zero, a chickadee needs 250 sunflower seeds a day. Can you imagine having to eat 250 hamburgers a day?

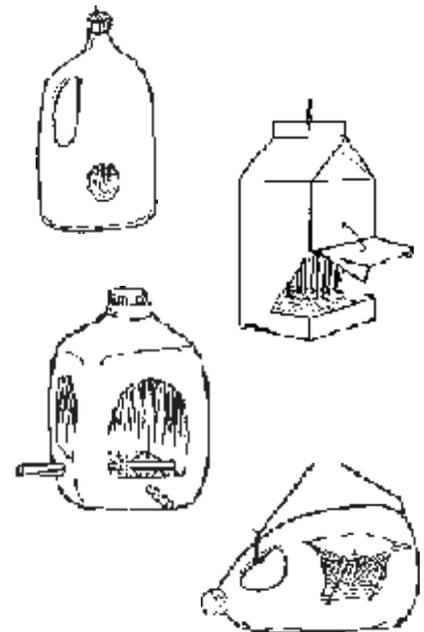
When things get really cold, chickadees are able to lower their body temperature. For most warm-blooded animals, this would cause serious problems. Chickadees can lower their body temperature by as much as 20 degrees. This causes their body fat to be used at a slower rate, making it last through the night. Come morning, the chickadees raise their temperatures back to normal. They leave their night roosts and head out for the never-ending task of finding food.

Chickadees sure do have some amazing ways of dealing with the cold!

Bird Feeders

Making a bird feeder can be very simple. It can be as easy as covering a pine cone in peanut butter and rolling it in bird seed. Almost any recycled container can be made into a feeder. Just make sure you clean and dry the container before you use it. Here is one to try. Ask an adult for help.

You'll need a gallon or half-gallon plastic jug, small wooden doweling rods or pencils, and string to hang the feeder. Cut two or three holes in the middle of the jug, as shown in the pictures. The holes should be between two and four inches wide depending upon the type of birds you want to attract. Then make smaller holes below the feeding holes for the doweling rod. Take each rod and insert it into the smaller hole for a perch. Fill the feeder with seed and hang it in a nearby tree.



Bird Feeding

A great way to watch chickadees and other birds is to put out a feeder. Feeders come in all shapes and sizes. You can buy them or build your own.

It is best to put out several different kinds of feeders. This allows you to offer different foods like sunflower seed, niger (NIGH-ger) thistle or suet (SUE-it). Each of these foods will attract different birds.

Finding a good spot for your feeder is important. Birds like to have shelter near their food. This is called “escape cover.” It gives the birds a place to escape enemies. A hedge, evergreen tree or shrub will provide good escape cover. The area right around the feeder should be open. This open space lets the birds see approaching danger. Other nearby trees and shrubs give birds a place to perch while opening seeds.

Now that your feeders are up, what kind of foods do you offer? The best all-round food is black-oil sunflower seeds. These small seeds are easy to open and have more oil in them than striped sunflower seeds. This oil is an excellent source of fat. Fat provides the energy a bird needs to stay warm. Tube feeders and platform feeders are good feeders to use with black-oil sunflower seeds.

Suet (a form of fat) is another high energy food. It can be mixed with peanut butter, peanut pieces, berries or even insects. You can buy suet in blocks that fit into a special suet feeder. Chickadees, nuthatches and woodpeckers really like suet.

Niger thistle is a very small seed. You need a special feeder with small feeding holes when using niger thistle. Small finches, like goldfinches and pine siskins, love niger thistle. Their small beaks can easily open the seeds. Larger house finches also enjoy niger thistle. These same finches also like millet. Millet can be offered in a thistle feeder or on a platform feeder.

Bird feeding is a popular hobby. Many birdwatchers got their start watching birds at their feeders. So, what are you waiting for?



This meadow vole is caching food for the winter.



Hidden Treasures

One reason chickadees can survive life in the north is because they store food. This is called caching (CASH-ing). Caching is an important behavior for many animals. When food is hard to find, they return to a cache (CASH) and are able to eat. This is very important in winter. The amount of food you eat depends upon how warm you stay.

In the fall, black-capped chickadees begin to store food. They place food in many places in their territory. This is called scatter hoarding, because they are scattering food all around their homes. Insects, insect eggs, berries, seeds and animal fat are all stored. The really amazing part is that the chickadees can remember where they hid most of their food. Biologists think the chickadees can remember what their cache looks like. They also think that the birds use the sun as a compass to find their caches.

Probably, the champion food hoarders of the bird world are Clark's nutcrackers. These relatives of crows and ravens have been known to store over 30,000 seeds in 2,500 different places!

Mammals also cache food. Rodents, such as chipmunks and squirrels, spend a lot of time hiding food. Even mountain lions get in on the act. These big cats often bury their dinner under leaves, pine needles or dirt. They spend most of their time near their hidden food grabbing a meal when they get hungry. When the food is gone, the cat moves on.

Do you have a cache? In your house, it may be called a pantry. You probably do not store insects in your pantry, but you might have seeds and berries.

Calling All Birds

Bird songs are something many people notice. Some songs are quite loud. Others are very soft. Still others do not even sound like singing! Not all of the sounds birds make are songs. Many bird sounds are actually calls instead of songs. So, what is the difference?

Bird songs are most often heard in the spring and early summer. Songs are usually sung by breeding males. The song lets other males know that this spot belongs to someone else. The resident male will keep watch over his territory, stopping frequently to sing. His song will also help him attract a female.

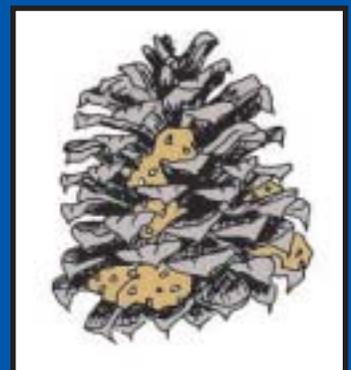
Calls are given at any time of the year. To us, they sound like chirps, hisses, grunts, whistles, shrieks, you name it. No matter what they sound like, bird calls give information about something happening. A call might alert other birds to danger. It might let birds in a flock know about a food source. Another call could be from a young bird begging for food from a parent. Certain calls are contact calls. They keep flock members together. Calls can even be used as a defense against enemies.

A black-capped chickadee is a good example of a bird that has a very different song and call. Its call is the familiar "chick-a-dee-dee-dee." Its song is a clear whistle that sounds like "cheese-bur-ger." This song is usually repeated several times in a row. Many people hear this song and never guess that it belongs to one of their favorite feeder birds.



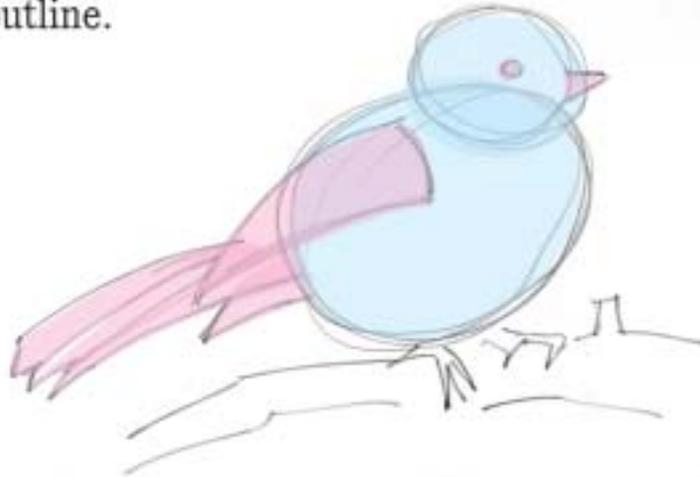
Bird Feeding Chart

BIRD TYPE	WHAT TO FEED
quail, pheasants	cracked corn, millet, wheat, milo
pigeons, doves	millet, cracked corn, wheat, milo, niger thistle, buckwheat, sunflower, baked goods
hummingbirds	plant nectar, small insects, sugar solution
woodpeckers	suet, meat scraps, sunflower hearts and seeds, cracked corn, peanuts, fruits, sugar solution
jays	peanuts, sunflower seeds, suet, meat scraps, cracked corn, baked goods
crows, magpies, nutcracker	meat scraps, suet, cracked corn, peanuts, baked goods, leftovers, dog food
titmice, chickadees	peanut kernels, sunflower, suet, peanut butter
nuthatches	suet, suet mixes, sunflower hearts and seeds, peanut kernels, peanut butter
wrens, creepers	suet, suet mixes, peanut butter, peanut kernels, bread, fruit, millet (wrens)
thrashers, catbirds	halved apple, chopped fruits, baked goods, suet, nutmeats, millet (thrashers), soaked raisins, currants, sunflower hearts
robins, bluebirds, other thrushes	suet, suet mixes, mealworms, berries, baked goods, chopped fruit, soaked raisins, currants, nutmeats, sunflower hearts
waxwings	berries, chopped fruit, canned peas, currants, raisins
warblers	suet, suet mixes, fruit, baked goods, sugar solution, chopped nutmeats
tanagers	suet, fruits, sugar solution, mealworms, baked goods
grosbeaks, cardinals	sunflower, safflower, cracked corn, millet, fruit
towhees, juncos	millet, sunflower, cracked corn, peanuts, baked goods, nutmeats
sparrows, buntings	millet, sunflower hearts, black-oil sunflower seeds, cracked corn, baked goods
blackbirds, starlings	cracked corn, milo, wheat, table scraps, baked goods, suet
orioles	halved oranges, apples, berries, sugar solution, grape jelly, suet, suet mixes, soaked raisins, currants
finches, siskins	niger thistle, sunflower hearts, black-oil sunflower seeds, millet, canary seed, fruits, peanut kernels, suet mixes



It's Easy to Draw a Chickadee!

1. Use basic geometric shapes like ovals and rectangles to lightly sketch in the outline.



2. Gradually fill in and darken the details.



WILDLIFE EXPRESS

Volume 18 • Issue 5 • Chickadee • January • 2005

Wildlife Express is published nine times a year (September-May) by the Idaho Department of Fish and Game. Classroom subscriptions and an Educator's Guide are available for \$30.00 per year and includes a classroom set of 30 copies mailed to your school each month. Subscriptions of five copies or less are available for \$10.00.

Wildlife Express is also available on the Idaho Department of Fish and Game website at no charge at <http://fishandgame.idaho.gov> For more information, call or write: **Wildlife Express, Idaho Department of Fish and Game, 600 South Walnut, PO Box 25, Boise, Idaho, 83707 (208) 287-2874.**

Lead Writers: Vicky Runnoe • Adare Evans
Layout and Design: Alyssa Jones
Contributors: Lori Adams • Kevin Frailey
• Renai Brogdon • Eric Stansbury

WE WOULD LIKE TO HEAR FROM YOU !

If you have a letter, poem or question for Wildlife Express, it may be included in a future issue! Send it to the address printed above!