

The Carolina Chickadee

A winter bandit

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The Carolina chickadee is a delightful gray songbird with a distinctive black cap, black bib and bright white cheeks. Chickadees are bold, curious and extremely vocal. They are found in woodlands, open forests, parks and urban areas. They are also frequent visitors to bird feeders.

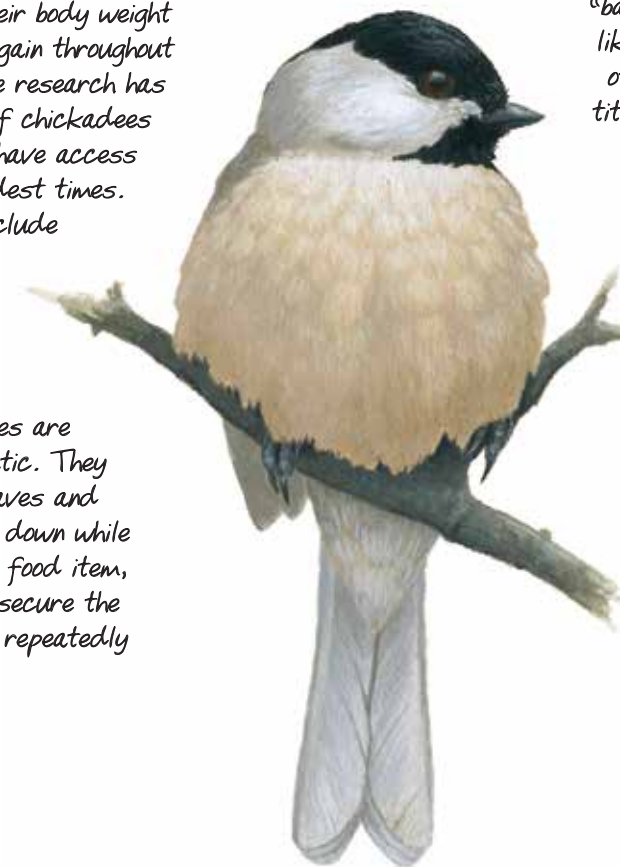
North America has seven species of chickadees. The Carolina chickadee is the only species common in Kentucky and is a year-round resident. Their song is a melodious four note "sue-fee-sue-bee." However, their name is derived from their raspy call of "chicka-dee-dee-dee." Research suggests that the number of "dee" notes at the end of their call increases with stress, such as the presence of a predator.



In the summer, chickadees feed almost entirely upon insects, larvae, caterpillars and spiders. During the winter, their diet is about half insects and half plants - mostly berries and seeds. When food is abundant, chickadees stash items in crevices to save for leaner times.

Chickadees need about 20 times more food in winter than summer. They will gain as much as 10 percent of their body weight each day only to lose it again throughout a cold winter night. Some research has shown the survival rate of chickadees nearly doubles when they have access to feeders during the coldest times. Favorite feeder foods include sunflower seeds, peanut chips and suet.

Although tiny, chickadees are extremely agile and acrobatic. They glean insect food from leaves and bark, and often hang upside down while foraging. After gathering a food item, they fly to a nearby perch, secure the food between their feet and repeatedly peck it apart.



During winter, chickadees travel in small flocks of up to eight birds. Groups of chickadees are known as "banditries," likely due to their mask-like markings. Flocks often mix with other bird species, including tufted titmouse, kinglets, brown creepers, nut hatches and woodpeckers.

Chickadees are cavity nesters. They excavate their nests in rotten or decaying wood, use a hole previously made by a woodpecker, or may use a nest box. Each nest is lined with moss, strips of bark and plant fibers. Their clutch size is usually six to eight eggs, with just one brood per season. Eggs hatch in about 12 days, with the young fledging about 21 days later.