

Black-Capped Chickadee

Poecile atricapillus

The family *Paridae* (meaning "titmouse family") includes the closely related chickadees and titmice. Members of this family are small, acrobatic flyers, with black throats and dark caps. Males and females as well as adults and juveniles are all similar in plumage. Their common name, "chickadee," imitates the sounds of their distinctive vocalizations. While titmice do not occur in Alaska, four species of chickadees inhabit the 49th state: the Black-capped Chickadee, Boreal Chickadee, Chestnut-backed Chickadee and the Gray-headed Chickadee.

At 13cm, the tame and friendly Black-capped Chickadee is a small species of open, boreal coniferous-deciduous woodlands and riparian thickets. These hardy little birds have short-wings, short-bills, large heads and a fluffy, rounded appearance. The overall color pattern of the Black-capped Chickadee is reflected in its Latin name, *Poecile atricapillus*, which means "variegated black hair." These chickadees are light-gray above and whitish below with white cheeks, a black bib, and brownish sides and flanks. Their tail and wings are edged in frosty white. As their name implies, they are distinguished from the Boreal Chickadee by the black rather than brown cap.

The song of the Black-capped Chickadee is a simple, high, pure whistle "fee-bee," with the second note lower than the first. Reminiscent of their common name, their call is the familiar "chikadee-dee-dee-dee." The alarm call is a very high, thin series of "tee-tee-tee-tee-tee" notes. Their scolding cries are heard immediately upon entering their territories, and these curious birds can easily be lured in closer for viewing by "pishing."

Black-capped Chickadee nests are built in tree cavities, often in deciduous snags, and lined with moss, hair, plant down, feathers, and insect cocoons. If an



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abandoned hollow (or nest box) is not used, both parents excavate and line the cavity within 10-14 days. The clutch consists of 5-10, 16-mm eggs that are white and finely marked with reddish-browns. Both parents incubate the clutch for 11-13 days and rear the offspring. Young birds fledge in another 14-18 days and disperse by 3 weeks post-hatching. Both parents raise the young birds.

The diet of the Black-capped Chickadee consists of insects, conifer seeds, fruits, spiders and insect eggs gleaned from shrubs and tree bark. While feeding, these active and agile birds often hang upside down from twigs! Social and unwary, these chickadees are easily attracted to birdfeeders.

These birds are year-round residents of Alaska, Canada and the northern and central United as far south as New Mexico. In winter, they forage in stable flocks of up to 12 birds and roost in dense conifers.