

“Tufted Titmouse”

by Sally Cureton

Recently a very loud tufted titmouse has been making himself known just a few yards from my front door. An amazing and wonderful little bird, they live throughout our woodland home here. They are quite active and noisy with a recognizable call that sounds like a whistled “peter-peter-peter”. The titmouse is always conspicuous and will often visit feeders looking for sunflower seeds. However, it is also a dominant bird that will chase away rival small birds from these feeders. Mostly a southern bird, its range does not extend up into Canada or much west of mid-Texas. In color the titmouse is mostly gray and white, with a perky little crest, a pale face, and a rusty tinge on its sides. They will have a conspicuous black eye and be about 6 to 6½ inches in length.

The origin of the name “titmouse” is an interesting one. In Icelandic a *titr* was anything small. In old Anglo Saxon *mase* was a name used for small birds. The true plural should be titmouses, but due to confusion with mouse, it is titmice. These birds exhibit long-term pair bonding. Sometimes the young of a previous brood will help at the nest. The male feeds the female from courtship through early hatching and they will stay in their family groups in the fall. These groups will then join in mixed flocks with other birds for the winter. These larger flocks are likely to include chickadees, as well as nuthatches and small woodpeckers.

Titmice are cavity nesters that will build in old woodpecker holes, or holes in old fence posts. They will also occasionally use nest boxes. Their nest will be a cup lined with moss, fur, bark, leaves, grass and snake skin. It is built in about a week and is from 3 to 90 feet off the ground, although they prefer to be higher rather than lower in the tree. They will not use the same nesting site for more than one year. The female titmouse will lay 5-7 eggs, each a little over ½ inch long. These will hatch in about 2 weeks and the nestlings will fledge in 15-18 days. Their diet includes seeds, fruit, spiders and their eggs, and a few snails. Titmice generally have a single brood each year although some will have a second one. They have a lifespan that is anywhere from 3 to 12 years long.

If you are interested in building a nest box for one of these little birds, it is a simple project. The box should have inside dimensions of 4 inches by 4 inches and a height of 8 - 10 inches. The entrance hole should be 1¼ in diameter and 6 - 8 inches above the floor of the box. This home would also be welcomed by chickadees if the hole was 1 1/8 inches in diameter. When hanging a birdhouse, it is best to have the opening facing to the south. This helps to give the birds the maximum sunlight and heat during the day. If you attach it to the tree, make sure that the

hole is slanting downward so water doesn't collect inside the box when it rains. Be sure to wrap a metal sleeve around the tree or post below the nest box to keep cats, raccoons and squirrels from getting into it.

This is a great time to check out the arboretum. Spring is putting on its best show for you right there!