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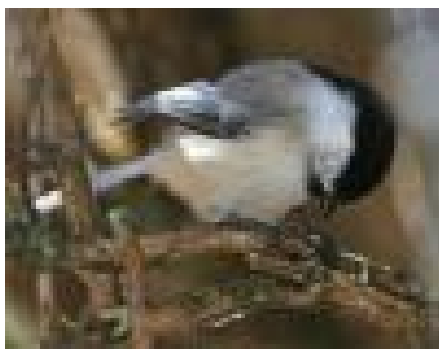
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Winter's little grey bundle of life and energy

by Rich Heffern

Eco Catholic

One of the miracles of our world is the lowly chickadee. It's a common little bird most often seen in winter. If there is a bird feeder nearby, you will see one or two of these little grey bundles of energy. The chickadee's range includes most of the United States.



A full-grown chickadee weighs little more than half an ounce, about the

weight of a few pieces of paper. Inside that tiny feathered frame is a heart that beats close to 700 times a minute, so fast that through a stethoscope its sound is just a busy buzz. Its body temperature ranges around 105 degrees, which explains the frenzied beating of its heart. On cold winter nights, these birds reduce their body temperature by up to 10-12 °C to conserve energy.

The chickadee has a black cap and bib with white sides to the face. Its underparts are white with rusty brown on the flanks and its back is grey. It has a short dark bill, short wings and a long tail.

On a cold winter day a chickadee needs its own weight in food. Its ounce of feathers can be fluffed until the bird is the size of a sparrow, keeping it warm when frigid winds blow. Its dark head and back gather additional heat from the winter sun.

In winter mixed flocks of chickadees and other birds forage in the trees. The flocks stay together because the chickadees call out whenever they find a good source of food. This calling-out forms cohesion for the group, allowing the other birds to find food more efficiently. Chickadees often move at mid-level through a forest accompanied by tufted titmice, nuthatches, and kinglets. It's definitely a bully, as it dives for seeds getting there first. It loves to hang upside down from a twig and scour the neighborhood.

In sparsely populated rural or forested areas, chickadees are often less wary than in urban settings. They may be observed exhibiting a sense of curiosity about the unfamiliar human activity within their habitat.

The bird is much more than the sum of its parts. Its bright, shining eyes and lively motions through the tree branches give it a personality that is unmistakable. It's an acrobat, an actor, a clown, a leader, never a follower. It loves a human audience. It's the state bird of Maine and Massachusetts. It's one of winter's best ambassadors from the animal realm.

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