



MONTEREY NEWS

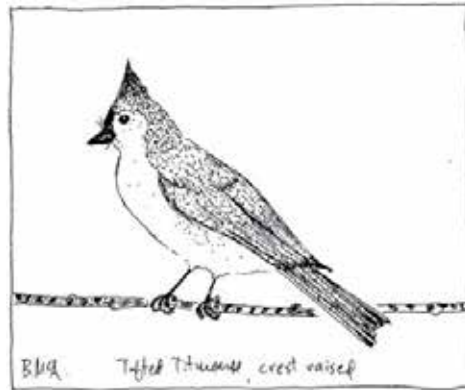
February 2024
Est. 1970 Vol. LIII • Number 2



Tufted Titmouse: Joy of the Winter

We sit in the kitchen and watch the birds on the feeder. What do we know of their experience of life? Not much, maybe, but we can take the time for a close look at this time of year as they pop in and pick up seeds. No matter how chilly or dreary the day, the small birds of the feeder come by, full of life. Because they are used to the setting here, they are bold. On our side of the window, we can move around, talk freely, take a few photos, and they don't seem to mind. We like to think they see us as amicable neighbors, or at least familiar faces.

One of the bird pals we see is the titmouse, or tufted titmouse. This is a small grey bird with a crest, and some might think it is a baby blue jay, another familiar crested bird. Edward Howe Forbush, state ornithologist for Massachusetts way back in the day, called the titmouse a "small gray chickadee with crown adorned with a pointed crest." There is a taxonomic family of birds called "tits." In England, where I studied biology for a year, there are several species which look very much like our chickadees. The British like to call a tit a tit: great tit, coal tit, blue tit, marsh tit, willow tit. Here, we have only one member of this family with the common name "tit," and this is our tufted titmouse. The tuft is its crest,



and it is moveable and expressive.

Titmice, like blue jays and chickadees, stay here through all the seasons. Their most common call, which sounds like "peter, peter, peter," is given all year round, but we can hear it especially in late winter and early spring, starting in March. This is when the winter flocks, which are family groups, break up for mating. The nest site is always a cavity in a tree and is lined with soft nesting material. They collect moss, leaves, grass, bark, and feathers, and particularly like to use hair. They will yank out tufts of fur from dogs and from squirrels' tails. This account, from Olive Thorne Miller, writing in *Birds of America* in 1917, shows that no species is safe from the nest-building titmouse.

"Another of these birds, in Ohio, looking about for something nice and soft to line her nest, pitched upon a gentleman's hair. Unfortunately, he had need

of the hair himself; but the saucy little Titmouse didn't mind that. She alighted on his head, seized a beakful, and then bracing herself on her stout little legs, she jerked out the lock, and flew away with it. So well did she like it that she came back for more. The gentleman was a bird-lover and was pleased to give some of his hair to such a brave little creature."

I like to think we still have such brave titmice and such kindly gentlemen in 2024. We do have many more titmice in Massachusetts now than in 1917. With the growing up of old fields over the last century we have more woodland habitat. Also, the titmice, once considered rare in this state, have extended their range northward, maybe in response to winter bird-feeding.

When they come to the feeder, titmice especially like to find sunflower seeds. They are somewhat aggressive there, raising their crests and standing up to other small birds and sometimes to squirrels. With their buffy sides, white cheeks, and black foreheads just over the bill, the titmice epitomize the understated beauty of New England woods in winter. You must pay a little more attention at this time of year, but you have the time to do it and you'll be well rewarded if you do. — Bonner McAllester