

Wild Things in Your Woodlands

Black-capped Chickadee (*Poecile atricapilla*)



The black-capped chickadee is a small songbird with a short bill. Male and female chickadees look alike, with a black cap on the head, a black bib, and white cheeks. They are mostly grey on the wings, tail, and back, and they have buff colored sides.

As the weather grows colder and snow begins to fall, black-capped chickadees remain active symbols of nature, even on the coldest winter days. Chickadees are common year-round residents in New York State. They survive the winter by roosting in dense vegetation and tree cavities. On cold winter nights, chickadees sometimes enter a state of regulated hypothermia, dropping their body temperature 18 - 22° F below their normal daytime temperature. By doing so, they can save a lot of energy.

Insects form a large part of the chickadee's diet, particularly in the summer. In the winter, they rely more on seeds and berries. Chickadees are also one of our most common birds at feeders. Research has shown that, especially during the fall, chickadees will also hide food under bark or dead leaves, or in knotholes. Later, when food is scarce, they return and retrieve the hidden food items. They are able to remember thousands of hiding places for up to a month! During fall and winter, chickadees often flock together to feed, and may flock with other species including titmice, nuthatches, brown creepers, and kinglets.

Chickadees live in wooded habitats of all kinds, including deciduous and mixed deciduous/coniferous woodlands, open woods, old fields, parks, and neighborhoods. They are most abundant along forest edges. Chickadees will excavate nest cavities in dead trees or dead tree limbs by pecking away rotting wood. They will also use old woodpecker holes if available, and sometimes will use nesting boxes if natural cavities are not available. The male and female both work to excavate the nest cavity, and the female alone lines the nest cavity with moss, feathers, plant down, hair, and insect cocoons. Once the cavity is lined, the female will roost on the nest until the eggs (6-8) hatch. The male feeds the female while she is on the nest, and both parents feed the young after they hatch.

Forests with between 50 and 75% canopy closure, and a well-developed middle and lower canopy layer, are optimum habitat for chickadees. The abundance of leaves under these conditions attracts insects that provide food for these birds. Because black-capped chickadees nest in tree cavities and can only excavate a cavity in soft or rotten wood, landowners can create ideal breeding habitat by managing to provide two snags per acre between 4 and 10 inches dbh. Trees that are dead or partially dead (at least half of the branches have either fallen, or are present but no longer have leaves) can be considered snags. Snags provide potential cavity trees for many other species as well as chickadees, and will help keep your woods alive year-round with the sights and sounds of bird life.

Kristi Sullivan coordinates the Conservation Education Program at Cornell's Arnot Forest. More information on managing habitat for wildlife, as well as upcoming educational programs at the Arnot Forest can be found by visiting the Arnot Conservation Education Program web site at www.arnotconservation.info

Black-capped chickadee photo courtesy of
U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service