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Black-Capped Chickadee

Birds of Barrington:

BLACK-CAPPED CHICKADEE

ON WINTER-DAY HIKES or cross-country ski outings in local forest preserves, I always brighten at the call of a black-capped chickadee: chick-a-dee-dee-dee. It's a call that delights both adults and children. The chickadee says its name!

The black-capped chickadee (*Poecile atricapillus*) is a year-round resident of Barrington. Despite its diminutive size of about five inches in length and less than half an ounce in weight, it is a fierce winter survivor. On frigid winter nights chickadees fluff up their feathers to maximize layers of warmth. They also can lower their body temperature by as much as 12°, achieving a sort of torpor uncommon in birds.

During daylight hours, when not flitting from tree to tree in search of live or hibernating insects, insect eggs, and cocoons, the chickadee can be enticed to bird feeders. It relishes sunflower, pumpkin, and squash seeds, nut meats, and suet. The chickadee


delights feeder watchers with its darting ways and ability to hang upside down on a chunk of suet or cling to the tiny lip of a small globe feeder.

Chickadees favor company in winter of others of their kind and of nuthatches, kinglets, and woodpeckers. Seldom will you find a solitary chickadee in winter months. Their cheery notes lift the gloom from the dreariest winter landscape.

As spring approaches, the chickadee bands disperse and the birds begin to pair off, whistling their high-pitched, two-note fee-bee song (which often is mistaken for that of an eastern phoebe). After a long winter, those cheerful notes are welcome music!

Once paired, the birds search for, or make, a tree cavity suitable for their nest. Sometimes they will use bird nest boxes, especially those designed for bluebirds and house wrens. Both male and female build the small, delicate mossy nest, lining it with bits of plant down and animal fur. Typically, the female lays five to

eight tiny eggs and incubates them for about 12 days.

The black-capped chickadee is often described as a dynamo, an acrobat, a woodland sprite. It is all of those. It is a bird common to Barrington woodlands. But in its ability to gladden and delight with its perky notes and elfin antics, it's quite an extraordinary species. 

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Wendy Paulson is a teacher and naturalist who has lived in the Barrington area for over 40 years. She revived the Nature Lady program in District 220 schools, started and directed

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