



## BIRDS

Status: Common, Native Resident

# BLACK-CAPPED CHICKADEE

(*Parus atricapillus*)

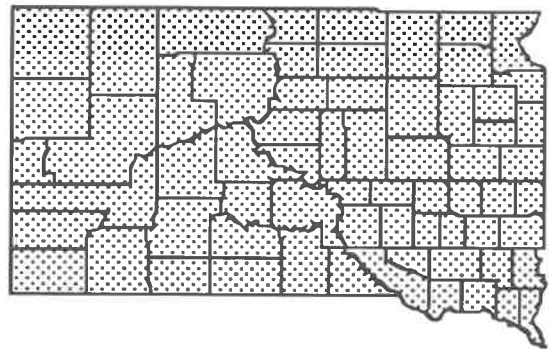
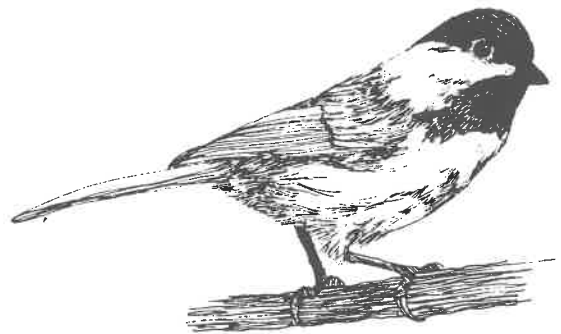
## Description

The genus name, *Parus*, is Latin for titmouse, indicating that chickadees belong to the titmouse family. Titmice are small, friendly birds that thrive in the presence of humans and are common at feeders. The name titmouse is derived from an Old Icelandic word, *titr*, meaning small and *mase*, an Anglo-Saxon word for kind of bird. The species name, from Latin, describes the chickadee's characteristic black (*atri*) crown (*capillus*). The common name, chickadee, comes from the bird's alarm call, "chicka-dee-dee-dee," that can be heard in South Dakota throughout the year. In the spring and summer, chickadees can be recognized by their mating call, a clear, sweet whistle that seems to say "hi sweetie," the "hi" being highest in pitch.

Chickadees are small perching birds, ranging between 4.75 and 5.75 inches (12-14.6 cm) in length with a short, rounded, black bill. They can be identified easily by their black cap and throat, white cheeks, buffy flanks, and gray back. Males and females are identical in coloration and size.

## Distribution

Black-capped chickadees are the only members of the titmouse family that are



common throughout the state. Black-capped chickadees breed in South Dakota and remain in the state

throughout the winter. They are common visitors to residential bird feeders, where they prefer sunflower seeds. In the wild they are found in woodland habitats.

## **Natural History**

Black-capped chickadees inhabit mixed hardwood-coniferous forests, woodland habitats, thickets, and residential areas. They are remarkably tame birds that, with patience, can be enticed to eat from people's hands.

Chickadees feed on a wide variety of foods including insect eggs and larvae, spiders, beetles, ants, aphids, millipedes, small amphibians, seeds of conifers, and wild fruits. At feeders, they prefer black-oil sunflower seeds and niger thistle seed.

In South Dakota, chickadees nest between late April and early July. Both males and females help dig nests in rotted branches of soft-wood trees, such as birch or pine. They also use abandoned woodpecker holes, bluebird boxes, and other available tree cavities. The females line the nest with soft materials, including plant fibers, hair, moss, feathers, and insect cocoons. The eggs, usually 6 to 8 in a nest, are white with brown spots. Incubation, accomplished by both parents, takes between 11 and 13 days. If disturbed,

incubating parents will emit a hissing call that sounds very much like an angry snake. Young remain in the nest approximately 2 weeks.

Chickadees have several adaptations that help them survive the cold winters in South Dakota. These include roosting in tree cavities, storing food in numerous locations for later use, seasonal increases in metabolic rates, and maintaining a lower body temperature during cold nights to save energy.

Banding records show that some chickadees have lived as long as 10 years, although the typical life span for these small songbirds is probably much shorter.

## **Conservation Measures**

Most songbirds are protected by state and federal laws. It is illegal to harm the birds or disturb their nests. Many people feed wild birds, such as chickadees. If you want to attract birds to your yard, you should provide seeds and water throughout the year. Birds come to depend on feeders, so it can be a problem for bird populations if feeding is done intermittently, or discontinued abruptly.

## **References**

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