

Black-crested Titmouse

The spring migration party is over and now we must return to the normal birding routines of watching our permanent and summer resident birds in our backyards, or at a favorite birding venue such as a nature center or park. It is, or will soon be, vacation time when birders can plan trips to special birding hot spots or different habitats, such as the mountains or coastal regions where one can enjoy other recreational activities as well as your birding times. Cooler summer climates rather than possible daily triple digits on the thermometer will likely be part of considerations for vacation destinations.

I would like to feature some of our most regular birds that we share our lives with here in the Texas Hill Country. Among these very common birds are the Black-crested Titmice that make regular trips to our feeders in our backyards. This bird does not possess a gaudy plumage as does the Painted Bunting, but because we share a close territorial relationship with our titmice, we feel like they are just part of the family. Because we see them so often, we are also likely to take them for granted, and ignore them.

Once considered a form of the more common eastern bird, the Tufted Titmouse, we here in the Hill Country we feel the Black-crested Titmouse is one of our “yard birds” along with their close associate, the Carolina Chickadee. If you keep your black oil sunflower feeders up during the summer months, you can predict with almost certainty that one or both of these two small songbirds will spend a significant part of their day around your feeder. Not equipped to crush a sunflower seed to expose the kernel with their thin beaks, these two waifs take one seed at a time to a nearby branch to chisel the seed casing open before consuming the kernel.

If you sit out on your deck or back porch early in the morning, you will likely hear the Black-crested Titmouse go through his repertoire of songs and calls, a series of whistles and thrills. If you are not familiar with his songs and calls, you might presume that several birds may be singing in your neighborhood. One of my favorite titmouse song/call sounds like a ringing telephone. The bird is not doing a mockingbird-like mimic of a phone ringing; the sounds are the bird’s natural voice.

The Black-crested Titmouse is named for his black crest as it differs from the gray crest of his close relative, the Tufted Titmouse. The eastern part of the Edwards Plateau is about as far west as the Tufted Titmouse ranges from its eastern United States domicile. Those people who have moved to the Hill Country from eastern Texas cities such as Dallas and Houston, are familiar with the gray-crested Tufted Titmice. Confusion over the color of the crest is possible because the young immature Black-crested Titmice have gray crests. Both species have light rufous- colored flanks, the only real color occurring on the birds.

Titmice are cavity nesters and will use any nest box or tree cavity with an entry hole in which they can fit. They often use my bluebird nest boxes as a favorable nest sites. Titmice gather green moss and lichens to make their nests; the mossy nesting material is usually green and very spongy. One of my favorite photos of a titmouse was taken on a porch or deck railing where a long-haired cat was sleeping while the titmouse was pulling hair from the cat's tail for nest building purposes. I like to think the bird knew the cat could not respond without falling off the railing.

Titmice are woodland birds that have adapted to cities and urban neighborhoods with wooded lots. When they are not paired during the breeding season, these birds often join small flocks. I have written about the close relationship they have with a close relative, the Carolina Chickadee. In the winter season, one can expect these loose flocks to also include kinglets, warblers, a creeper or nuthatch, and other small songbirds. Your level of birding interest can rise and fall quickly as these flocks rotate around your neighborhood.

Article by Bill Lindemann