

## Winter Chickadees

By Gisele Winton Sarvis

Hiking between the farmer's field and the deciduous forest at Scanlon Creek Nature Centre near Bradford, Ontario, a grade 3 class and I were studying different types of soils. As soil explorers we were hiking to different locations to see, touch and smell clay, silt and humus soils. (Students usually balk at having to smell soil, but it smells surprising fresh, especially the humus.)

I always like to bring a sense of discovery and adventure to all the outdoor education programs I offer, so to this end I am always on the lookout for the presence of wildlife. This, however, was a late November day and there was a scarcity of wildlife in the open. Most of the insects were hibernating, the summer birds had departed and common mammals in the area were mostly nocturnal.

Walking along a trail cut between evergreen trees, I spotted some black-capped chickadees. I shushed the line of students behind me, told them about the birds ahead and asked them to walk quietly with eyes wide open.

While the first few students in the line were quiet, the rest were noisy and I'm not sure how many actually saw any chickadees. I stopped again and gathered the students around to tell them about how chickadees are well adapted to life in central Ontario.

Just then an eight-year-old girl said, "What's a chickadee?"

My jaw dropped. She had to be joking. Everyone knows what a chickadee is, do they not? I can't remember when I didn't know. I looked at the teacher in horror. She just stared back at me blankly — no help. I wanted to say "Well, if you'd ever spent any time outside in your life kid, you'd know." What I think I said was, "You need to spend more time outside." And what I should have said is "Sweetie, they are the most plentiful bird overwintering in central Ontario."

Just then a chickadee came onto a branch overhanging the path. I didn't have any seeds but I put my hand out to see if the chickadee would land anyway. It didn't. But I knew it wouldn't be long until those tiny beautiful birds would fearlessly join us.

It was a great opportunity to talk to the children about how these well-dressed puff balls will land on a human hand for seeds in the winter when their food supply is diminished.

Everyone should experience the pure thrill of having a chickadee land on their hand. If it's happened to you, you'll never forget. In a brilliant instant a wild animal touches your hand and your heart. Such wild animal and human contact is rare, which is why winter programs offering this experience are so valuable.

Chickadees are marvels at behavioural adaptation. While they feed predominately on insects and fruit in the summer, they switch their food source to seeds in the winter. Their beaks are adapted to accommodate different menus in different seasons.

Physically they are small, which is a disadvantage in the winter as they cannot store fat. They must eat continuously during the short daylight hours to be able to survive through long cold nights.

For such small birds, they have an amazing brain, caching away seeds, insects and other food into tree bark in the fall and later remembering where they put it.

Curiously, while chickadees pair off in the spring, in the fall they form flocks numbering four to 14. Perhaps they huddle for warmth on winter nights.

If you are interested in feeding chickadees, they thrive on black oil sunflower seeds. Research has shown that birds that are well

fed not only survive the winter but have more successful clutches in the spring. Remember to clear snow away from feeders and offer more than one feeding location, as chickadees are territorial.

Coniferous tree seeds are high in fat and oil and their branches offer birds shelter. As a result, feeders should be placed near coniferous trees, shrubs or tall annuals left standing, so the birds can quickly move from tree to feeder and back. In my

garden I allowed goldenrod to grow, thinking it was something I'd planted. By the time I figured out my mistake, bees, wasps and chickadees were feeding from the flowers, so I didn't pull them out.

A strategy to get chickadees to come to your hand is to leave seeds out at the edge of an evergreen area, where they roost at night. Visit it regularly, stand still with seeds in your outstretched hand and, with any luck, the curious acrobats will soon appear and land on you to partake of much needed sustenance.

The grade 3 class and I continued walking, making our way toward the usual winter hand feeding chickadee spot. As we got closer, another little girl said, "I remember this place. A chickadee landed on my hand." She had come with her Brownie group last winter.

My faith in the human race restored, we carried on to the maple forest.

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