

The Chaff-finch



By Bill Naylor



Since the advent of arable farming, the chaffinch and other seed-eating birds have congregated on farms in great numbers at harvest time to feed on the piles of chaff, the grain debris left over from threshing (thrashing) sheaves of cereal grains, mainly types of wheat. Prior to the invention of the combined harvester this was how cereal grains were hulled, and it's still the method used in developing nations.

For 30,000 years, wheat and related grains have been used to make bread - the earliest known prepared food. In Britain, arable cereal grain production probably assisted the chaffinch to become the second most common UK bird after the wren. (Until the mid-2000s when their population slightly declined due to the wild bird disease trichomonosis, that decimated the UK greenfinch population.)

Although the chaffinch, originally restricted to woodland, was attracted to farmland for chaff in summer and insects among overwintering stubble in winter, it spread further afield and is a regular visitor to bird feeders where it often feeds on the ground. The white wing and outer tail feathers of male and female produce the white 'flash' of plumage when they land or take off.

Nowadays, compared to the nightingale, and even the robin and blackbird, the chaffinch isn't considered a notable songster, but in the 19th Century it was the commonest European caged singing bird. Its song is a short catchy phrase and it wasn't just kept for home entertainment. The

song of the male (only rarely emitted by the hen) consists of a two second burst of descending twittering notes, ending in a flourish and repeated after an intermission of seven to fifteen seconds. In the breeding season the song is uttered six times a minute on a loop, 3000 times a day, from March to July. The song was a hit! Chaffinch singing contests usually held in back rooms of inns became immensely popular.

At the end of the 19th Century, there was a shortage of chaffinches in London Parks. This was owing to local trappers meeting the demands of owners who hoped their bird would win the equivalent of 'My Chaffinch has got Talent'. This involved single caged male chaffinches producing the most songs in a given time, usually around fifteen minutes. An adjudicator would count the songs by adding notches to a stick to record the number of songs sung by each competitor.

Unlike some bird species whose songs are instinctive and unchangeable, chaffinches learn a basic song from their father which they can modify. After leaving their parents' care they establish a home range, where they usually remain for life, and modify their song to match the chaffinch song dialect of that area. Although bird song dialects were not scientifically recognised until the 1960s, Victorian Bird trappers were well aware chaffinch songs varied according to location. Chaffinches with a song dialect that enabled them to sing faster with the shortest pauses between songs, producing more songs per performance, were highly-prized celebrities.