

The Piedy

By Bill Naylor



The Geordie name 'Piedy' aptly describes the attractive tri-coloured pink, white and grey plumage of the long-tailed tit. These feathered ping pong balls with their long, stiff tails always appear in a flock, consisting largely of family members from a previous breeding season, constantly communicating uttering their familiar contact call 'see see see.' Hence the name Long-tailed Chittering.

At six inches in length their tail is as long as their body, yet they only weigh as much as a wren. Their habit of hanging upside down as they forage has earned them the names 'bottle brush' and 'bell ringer'. As they tumble acrobatically through the tree branches, constantly moving and calling, they search for aphids and other insects on the underside of leaves. In inclement weather their ruffled and windswept plumage gave rise to another of their many names 'Ragamuffin'. They only nibble a few seeds and peanuts from bird feeders, mainly in winter, as they're chiefly insect eaters.

They're oblivious to humans, but never linger long. Following a flying visit they're soon off to another location. When night-time temperatures fall, they roost communally inside nest boxes and tree cavities, where as many as thirty individuals can assemble. In hard winters, populations can decline by 80%, but they're resilient little birds, surviving for as long as nine years in the wild.

Distributed over the whole of Britain and as far north as Sweden, Finland and Russia, they also have an extensive distribution across Europe and Asia, even among mountainous regions. Our resident long-tailed tit is the geographical race *rosaceus*, and uniquely has a pinkish tinge to its plumage, an orange-red eye ring and black eye stripe. Males often have a prominent wide white streak running from the crown of their heads to the nape of the neck, while in females this area is tinged with grey. The Northern race (*caudatus*) is a rare visitor to the UK from Scandinavia with a pure white head and no eye ring.

The nest of a long-tailed tit is one of the most unusual of any British bird, which takes the best part of a month to construct. Over 2,000 small feathers are used to line the soft, mossy structure, which is wrapped in a tight scaffolding of glistening spiders' webs to provide waterproofing, which is then disguised with pieces of lichen. One nest was covered in 4,000 flakes of lichen. Another was covered in 1,500 polystyrene chippings.

The high mortality in bad winters is offset by the high production of offspring. Commencing in April, long-tailed tits will lay two or three clutches of 8-12 eggs incubated for 14 days by the female, who when sitting on the eggs brings her tail over her head blocking the nest's entrance hole. Long-tailed tits are cooperative breeders and up to eight non-breeding flock members, including youngsters from a previous clutch, assist in rearing a breeding pair's nestlings.

