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Chickadees Tough It Out Over Winter

By Daniel Giesbrecht

The cold nip of February weather will often find many Canadians indoors, daring to venture out in the sub-zero temperatures only when absolutely necessary (or when having a snowball fight). When the weather drops to ridiculously cold temperatures, we are forced to throw on layer after layer of clothing in order to keep warm. How then can a small bird, weighing no more than an average ballpoint pen, have a chance of surviving the harsh Saskatchewan winter months? Welcome to the life of the black-capped chickadee.

If you live in the Saskatoon area and at least somewhat frequent the outdoors, chances are you have seen or heard a chickadee as they pass nearby. These adorable black-and-white balls of fluff are a fairly common bird to spot on any given day, flying through trees and shrubs in search of food. Easily identifiable by their unique black cap, white cheeks and signature “chick-a-dee-dee-dee” call, chickadees can be found throughout the province. They prefer wooded areas and can be found anywhere from the great forests of the north to residential neighbourhoods.

Instead of heading south for the winter, chickadees remain in the same general area year-round, as they are a non-migratory bird. So, much like us, they decide to face Mother Nature head on and tough it out for the cold winter months. This is not such an easy task as it may sound; overwintering in Saskatchewan is quite an undertaking for such a small bird. Every day they must forage for food almost continually as they constantly need to burn fat to keep warm. On especially cold nights, chickadees can lose as much as 10 percent of their body weight in fat. That is the equivalent of a 150-pound person losing 15 pounds overnight! As dusk approaches, a chickadee will find a small cavity in a tree to roost so it is less exposed to the wind. Remarkably, they can also lower their internal body heat by as much as nine degrees to save energy while they sleep.



The black-capped chickadee, a non-stop ball of activity, feeds all day to store up the energy it needs to make it through a long cold night.

Photo by Nick Saunders

A chickadee’s winter diet consists of seeds, berries and frozen insets found in the nooks and crannies of tree branches. Backyard bird feeders are a common place to find these birds as they provide a steady and reliable source of food. Black-capped chickadees are very curious birds. In areas where people commonly feed birds, they may even dare to snatch a sunflower seed right out of your hand if you stand still enough. If you are attempting to attract chickadees to your feeder, the best feed to use is black oil sunflower seeds.

Chickadees are social birds during the winter. They form loose flocks that forage together, usually numbering between four and 10 birds. This can provide a flock with a large amount of safety, as they are very alert and will sound a warning call at the slightest hint of danger. The main predators of the black-capped chickadee in winter include sharp-shinned hawks, merlins and domestic cats. As a rule, the more “dee-dee” calls a bird makes in a row, the more distressed it is. Chickadee flocks are so alert to danger that many other bird species will often flock with them. Though they have different calls and come from different families, they will recognize chickadee alarm calls and dart into the nearest hiding spot they can find.

No matter the obstacles they may face, the black-capped chickadee has proven time and again that it is a true winter survivor. Able to overcome tremendous odds, they are a remarkable species, a true bird of the Canadian winter. Above all else, they are one of the cutest birds out there and that’s gotta count for something

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