

NOTES FROM YESTERYEAR: 1

On Wrens, Tits and Golden-crested Wrens:

For wrens, tits, and Golden-crested Wrens (Goldcrest) the fir plantations of Suffolk are as paradise all the year round. The first-named little bird may often be seen creeping about amongst the small holes and tunnels at the roots of trees, especially overturned trees going down into one and coming out at another, as though it were a mouse. It is very pretty to see it peep and creep and disappear, and then demurely appear again. Often it will be underground for quite a little while long enough to make one wonder, sometimes, if anything has happened to it but nothing ever has. As soon as it has explored one labyrinth, it utters its little *chirrupy, chirpy, chattery* note, and flits, a brown little shadow, to another, into the first dark root-cavern of which it, once more, disappears. House-hunting, it looks like for the coming spring quarter, it being February now, but it is too early for the bird to be really thinking of a nest, and no doubt the finding of insects is its sole object.



The Golden-crested wrens are more aerial in their search for food. They pass from fir-top to fir-top, flitting swiftly about amongst the tufts of needles, owing to which, and their small size, it is difficult to follow their movements accurately. The pine-needles seem very attractive to them. I have often searched these for insects, but never with much success, and I think, myself, that they feed principally upon the tiny buds which begin to appear upon them, very early in the year. In winter they may often be seen about the trunks of the trees, and I remember querying as to what they could get there on a cold frosty morning in December, when a spider, falling on the note-book, answered it in a quite satisfactory manner. Many spiders hibernate under the rough outer bark of the Scotch fir, often in a sort of webby cocoon, which they spin for themselves; numbers of small pupae, too, choose or have chosen in their pre-existences the same situations, especially that of the cinnabar moth, which is extremely common about here.



Coal-tits, too, feed much on the delicate little buds at the ends of the clusters of spruce-needles, but they, likewise, pull at and examine the needles themselves, so may find some minute insects at their bases. They eat the buds of the larch, too, and, as said before, whatever they can get by prying and probing about, on the trunks of all these firs especially that of the Scotch one, which they search, sometimes, very industriously. Whilst thus engaged they say at intervals, "*Woo-tee, woo-tee, woo-tee*" (or "*Weetee,*" a sound between the two), and sometimes "*Tooey, tooey, tooey-too ; tooey, tooey, tooeytoo.*" They flit quickly from place to place, and, both in this and their way of feeding generally, a good deal resemble the little Golden Wrens. The latter, however, are brisker, more fairy-like, and still more difficult to watch. Yet, do not let me wrong the coal-tit he moves most daintily. Every little hop is a little flutter with the wings, a little flirt with the tail; his little legs you hardly see. How he gets to any place can be a mystery!



But if there is such a mystery in the movements of the Coal-tit, what is to be said about those of the Long-tailed Tit? It would be most unfair to omit him, now that the other has been mentioned. Like other tits, these little long-tailed ones are fond of hanging, head downwards, on the under-side of a bough or twig: but I am not sure if I have seen other tits come down on a bough or twig in this way at any rate not to the same extent. Say that a Blue or a Great Tit, and a long-tailed one, are both on the same bough, together. The two former will fly, or flutter-fly, to another, alight upon its upper side, and get round to its under one, by a process that can be seen. The Long-tailed Tit will jump and arrive on the under-side, hanging there head downwards. That, at least, is what it looks like, as if he had turned himself on his back, in the air, before seizing hold of his twig. Really there is a little swing down, after seizing it like an acrobat on a trapeze but this is so quick that it eludes the eye. It is by his legerdemain and illusion, and by his jumping, rather than flying, from bough to bough, that the Long-tailed Tit is distinguished. He often makes a good long jump a real jump without appearing to aid himself with his wings at all. The note of these tits is a "Zee, zee zee, zee, zee, zee," but it is not of such a sharp quality as the "zee" or "tzee" of the Blue Tit. It is more pleasing indeed, there is something very pleasing about it. What is there, that is not pleasing about this little bird?

But I have something more to say upon the subject of the Coal-tit's diet; for he eats, I believe, the seeds of the fir-cones, and manages not only to pick them out of these, but to pick the cone itself to pieces in so doing a wonderful feat, surely, when one thinks how large and hard the cone is, and how small the bird. It is not on the tree that I have seen these tits feeding in this manner, but on the ground, and the question, for me, is whether the cones that lay everywhere about had been detached and then reduced, sometimes, almost to shreds, by them or by squirrels. At first I unhesitatingly put it down to the latter, but I soon noticed that in these particular firs not part of a plantation but skirting the road, as is common here a squirrel was never to be seen. Neither were coal-tits numerous, but still a pair or two seemed to live here, and were often engaged with the cones. Half-a-dozen of these I took home to examine at leisure. Two, I found, had been only just commenced on, and the punctures upon them were certainly such as might have been made by the beak of a small bird, suggesting that the tit had here begun the process of picking the cone to pieces, before any squirrel had touched it. One of the outer four-sided scales had been removed, and as no cut or excoriation was visible upon the surface thus exposed, this, again, looked more as if the scale aforesaid had been seized with a pincers the bird's beak and torn off, than as though it had been cut away with a chisel the squirrel's teeth for, in this latter case, the plate beneath would, in all probability, have been cut into, too, at some point, and not left in its natural smooth state. Another two of these cones consisted of the bases only, and from their appearance and the debris around them, seemed to have been pecked and torn, rather than gnawed to pieces. In five out of the six, the extreme base that part from the centre of which the stalk springs had been left untouched. In the sixth, however, this had been attacked, and presented a rough, hacked, punctured appearance, the stalk itself represented by just a point having apparently been pecked through, suggesting strongly that the tits had commenced work while the cone hung on the tree, and had severed it in this way. It certainly looked as though these cones had been hacked and pulled to pieces by the tits, and not gnawed by squirrels, so as this agreed with the absence of the latter, and what I had actually seen the bird doing, I came to the conclusion that they had been.

But what, now, is the origin of the name "*coal-tit*," which seems to have no particular meaning? Is it a corruption of "*cone-tit*," which, if the bird really feeds on the seeds of the fir, and procures them in this manner, would have one?

N.B. Excerpt taken from "*Bird Life Glimpses*" by Edmund Selous, published in 1905. He lived in Icklingham, Suffolk from 1899 to 1902 and kept numerous notes all about the local birdlife, which culminated in his volume being printed.