

CHARACTERISTICS OF TWO SPECIES OF CHICKADEES

Considerable difficulty in field identification is experienced with those birds in which two or more species have marked similarities in form and color. This is true of chickadees of the genus Parus, flycatchers of the genus Empidonax, and dowitchers, genus Limnodromus.

Following is a verbal key to aid in the identification of:

BLACK-CAPPED CHICKADEE
Parus atricapillus

and

CAROLINA CHICKADEE
Parus carolinensis

Head and Nape

1. White cheek patches usually brilliantly white, appearing to be quite large; the lustrous black of the nape (back of head and neck) comparatively narrow, contrasting sharply with the adjacent white cheeks.

White cheek patches a drab grayish-white, appearing smaller; the black nape wider, its dull tone not contrasting sharply with the drab, whitish cheek patches.

Lower throat and breast

2. Posterior (lower) border of black throat patch ragged appearing where it meets the white of the belly, caused by the terminal ends of some black feathers having rather broad edges of white or gray.

Dividing line between posterior border of black throat patch sharp and distinct between it and light upper belly.

Ventral surface of belly and flanks

3. The broad, median, whitish ventral area, extending from throat patch to tail, contrasts sharply with the buffy flanks, giving an "open vest" appearance.

The "dingy-white" ventral area does not contrast sharply with the pale buffy or buffy-white flanks, except in some well marked individuals in fresh fall, clean plumage.

Wings

4. Under average conditions, the whitish outer edgings of the secondaries and primaries, and the usually wide, hoary-white edgings of the greater wing coverts (angle of wing), are quite conspicuous.

The light, outer edgings (normally observable) of secondaries and primaries are not conspicuous; the light edgings of the greater wing coverts, when present, also inconspicuous.

Back

5. Usually a lighter gray; often, in fresh plumage, with a pronounced buffy or olive cast.

Usually darker; buffy cast faint when present.

Tail

6. Outer edgings of tail feathers narrowly bordered with hoary-white, often conspicuous in flight.

Outer edgings of tail feathers normally without lighter borders, or inconspicuously edged with light gray, not visible in flight.

Size

7. Averages larger with a longer tail; size often appears to be accentuated by the fluffiness of the plumage.

Averages smaller with a shorter tail, plumage normally appears to be more compact and much less fluffy.

Voice

8. Two or three notes whistled as a series, the 2nd, or 2nd and 3rd, of each series slightly lower than the 1st; all notes usually delivered slowly enough to be counted (calls more rapid when bird is excited); usually a day day or phe bee.

Series usually of 4 or more notes and with a greater drop in pitch between the first note of a series and the remainder; often given too rapidly to count individual notes; usually a dee dee dee dee or chick a dee dee dee dee.

Habits (in winter especially)

9. Usually most confiding, often readily approaching one, especially if he squeeks, whistles the "Screech Owl call"; occasionally attempts to alight on one, can be readily "tamed" to eat from the hand, especially during severe weather.

Usually much shyer and less confiding, occasionally may respond to squeeking or whistling by briefly approaching closer; more frequently moves away after one squeeks or whistles; when repeatedly approached becomes increasingly shy, disappearing or keeping in the distance, or flying in the upper branches of a tree.

Possible hybridization

Occasional skins approach intermediacy in measurements and color; intermediate songs have been tape recorded.

To identify

Use all characteristics, if possible. Remember that:

1. Black-caps with soiled plumage may approach or resemble Carolinas in coloration.
2. Carolinas in fresh, clean plumage may resemble Black-caps.
3. Occasional, rather confiding Carolinas act as do Black-caps; the reverse is likewise true.
4. Voice may not be distinctive if birds are quite excited.
5. An occasional bird may be encountered whose identity in the field cannot be made with certainty.

Cheeks and nape, wings, voice, flanks, habits, throat, tail, and size are the more important characteristics, and in the order named.