

Restless 'Tom Thumb' bird with a big heart

THE INCESSANTLY busy and agile Goldcrest is our smallest native bird, barely measuring 3 ½ inches (9 cm), and weighing as little as 5 grams (one-fifth of an ounce), which is, approximately, the same as a 20 pence coin!

This tiny green bird is an integral part of life in the coniferous plantations and large gardens of Oban and Lorn, where it darts, hops and hangs among the outermost branches of spruce, pine and larch, searching for minute insects, spiders and their eggs.

To aid their survival, Goldcrests have developed a special feeding method, known as 'hover gleaning', in which they flutter, like a Hummingbird, while seizing tiny morsels of

Despite their ability to endure sub-zero temperatures, Goldcrests are susceptible to prolonged bouts of cold, wintry weather. However, recent and successive mild winters have renewed optimism regarding the health of Britain's Goldcrest population.

Local birdwatcher, Stuart Gibson, added: 'Almost everything about this remarkable bundle of feathers is geared to minimising heat loss.

'The nest of the Goldcrest in spring is a feat of avian architecture and engineering par excellence; a tiny cup of cobwebs, lichen, feathers and moss, intricately woven and slung from the outermost branch of a conifer, in which may be cradled up to 13 miniscule eggs.

'These nests are incredibly well insulated, with a canopy of feathers forming a loose umbrella which appears to prevent warm air from escaping. The eggs, themselves,

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prey from the tips of leaves, with the aid of their needle-like beaks.

Goldcrests are among the world's smallest songbirds. Indeed, there are some people who persist in their belief that birds, such as Goldcrests, are too small to even exist! Yet, exist they do, with some of the local population being at least partially resident throughout the year within the conifer forests of the coldest areas of Argyll.

Even so, during the shorter days of autumn and winter, Goldcrests exist in a state of perpetual motion, having to spend almost all of their lives foraging for food, in order to survive through to the next day. Goldcrests can withstand 18 hours of darkness, at temperatures of -25 degrees Celsius, by burning fat equivalent to 20% of their body weight in a single night.

With this in mind, the coldest winter's night in the Oban area must seem tropical, by comparison!

The Goldcrest is a widespread breeding bird, with over half-a-million pairs settling to nest in Britain each spring, the numbers of which are hugely swelled in Autumn with the arrival of incoming continental migrants (3 - 5 million birds).



are laid in layers in the nest cup, and are kept warm by the female's well-vascularised legs, as well as her brood patch.' Goldcrests are often double-brooded. When the young of the first clutch are half-grown, the exhaustively restless female departs to another nest, constructed by her mate, in which she lays a second clutch of eggs, leaving the male to complete the rearing of the initial brood.

Goldcrests are not bird-table birds, although in late summer they start to disperse from their breeding haunts, a time when individuals often turn up in local gardens, as they scour hybrid tea and floribunda roses in search of aphids.

During the winter months, Goldcrests can be seen among the loose, mixed flocks of Blue, Coal and Great tits, Tree creepers and Long-tailed tits that roam local woodlands and gardens in search of food.

It is at such times that this incredible little avian gem becomes remarkably confiding of man, often allowing such a close approach that makes it possible to see the yellow inner stripe on its black crown that gives it its name – Goldcrest.