

# Performing at a peanut feed near you

**T**he rounded, black, white and pink body and slender tail of the Long-tailed Tit make it an unmistakable favourite of garden birdwatchers.

Increasingly, in recent years, this charming little bird has become a regular visitor to bird-tables, where they have adapted to peanut feeders in true titmouse style.

Feeding stations are used most in late winter, when natural food supplies will be at their lowest, so now may be a good time to be on the look-out for this delightful visitor in gardens throughout Oban and Lorn.

Small parties of Long-tailed Tits are great fun to watch, as they roam and forage through gardens and woodlands in winter.

Long-tailed Tits are more insectivorous than the true garden titmice (Long-tailed Tits are only distant relatives of the more familiar Blue Tit, for instance), and they are like little bundles of perpetual motion, as they feed close to the end of branches. Suddenly, one of the group will depart and the rest of the tribe will tag along in a 'follow-my-leader' fashion.

Local birdwatcher Stuart Gibson said: 'A Long-tailed tit has been likened to a knitting needle stuck in a ball of pink, black and white wool'

'They are marvelously entertaining little birds, as they flit, in noisy troops, from tree-to-tree in search of food.

'However, it is only relatively recently that Long-tailed tits have started coming to gardens to feed at bird-tables. 'Like House Sparrows and Chaffinches, these delightful avian lightweights have adapted to feeding on hanging peanut dispensers, just like Blue tits.'

Many of these flocks contain the same individuals from year to year, although a particularly severe winter can reduce the British population (220,000 territories) by as much as 80%.

Being small and weighing as little as seven grams, Long-tailed Tits are susceptible to cold weather, and have to spend most of the daylight hours available in winter looking for food.

At night, Long-tailed Tits roost tightly bunched together

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to reduce heat loss. The colder the weather, the closer the birds in the roost will huddle together to keep warm, suggesting why these little avian gems are so sociable in their behaviour at other times.

Long-tailed Tits start to breed early in spring, building an

elaborate domed nest, made up of moss, lichens and held together by spiders' webs.

This structure is often to be found deep within a thorny bush, like berberis, gorse or hawthorn, and is lined with up to 2,300 tiny feathers, making a very cosy duvet for the eggs and nestlings.

Such constructions take up to 39 days to complete, during which time the builder's may have traveled some 800 miles simply collecting materials. However, nests are regularly predated and losses high, but, being 'co-operative breed-

