

Chautauqua Watershed Notes
From the Chautauqua Watershed Conservancy
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Chickadee-Dee-Dee!

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For the Chautauqua Watershed Conservancy



Sunflower seeds offered at your bird feeder give Black-capped Chickadees a helpful nutritional boost as they forage during the cold, snowy months of winter. Photo courtesy of John Wiessinger.

Chickadee-dee-dee! Who hasn't heard this bird call and knows the name of its cute little black-capped caller? After all the call is its name. Invariably chickadees are the first to find our winter feeders. Count your visitors as they flit in and out, in and out: about six to ten birds? This is the average winter flock size. These winter flocks gather in autumn presumably to help one another find food over the winter. Once formed the flock remains stable for the

winter. The perpetual chickadee-dee-dee vocalization holds the flock together. It's as if they are saying "Here I am, where are you?" Although united in the common cause of food-finding the flock does have its hierarchy. There is one dominant pair who with a scolding "dee-dee-dee" lays down the law. Your feeder is one of the flock's favorite foraging places, but not necessarily their only one. That little flock probably regularly visits your neighbor's feeder and the nearby woods. Each place they visit they claim as their own territory and vigorously defend it against other chickadee flocks.

In eastern North America there are three species of chickadee: Boreal Chickadee, Black-capped Chickadee, and Carolina Chickadee. The chickadee that occurs throughout the Chautauqua Watershed is the Black-capped Chickadee. Obviously when at your feeder chickadees dine on the proffered birdseed. You'll find sunflower seeds are a universal favorite and that a chickadee enjoys a good peck of suet now and again. In their natural woodland habitat, usually woods that contain conifers (pine, spruce, and hemlock trees), the fare may be cone seeds and insect larvae that lurk beneath the bark. They are bold little birds, perching quite close scolding you with a "dee-dee-dee" to hurry up as you fill their feeder, perhaps even flitting in for a quick peck of seed while you still stand there. With patience you can get chickadees to eat from your hand. It's incredible to feel the light touch of tiny toes on your fingertips.

Drip, drip, drip “fee-bee,” the sound of melting snow harmonizes with the chickadee’s two-pitched song. Notice that I identify the “chickadee-dee-dee” vocalization as a call and the “fee-bee” vocalization as a song. Calls are used by both sexes of birds for communication. Males sing in order to attract a mate and warn other male birds of the same species to stay away from his nesting territory. It is time for the winter flock to split up into monogamous breeding pairs and claim nesting sites, preferably tree cavities in the woods. There should be plenty of insects available there to feed themselves and their young, although if you keep your feeder up all seasons some chickadees will stop in for a little fast food in the summer.

Meanwhile while the snow is deep and the temperature low enjoy the “chickadee-dee-dee” calls of the little winter flock at your feeder, one of the simple pleasures of living in the Chautauqua Watershed.

The Chautauqua Watershed Conservancy is a private, not-for-profit, 501(c)(3) organization with a mission to preserve and enhance the water quality, scenic beauty and ecological health of the lakes, streams and watersheds of the Chautauqua region. Its urgent focus is to conserve the endangered natural shore lands of Chautauqua Lake, which provide fish and wildlife habitat and pollution filtering functions essential to a healthy lake. Only four miles (10%) of the lake’s shoreline remains in a natural, undeveloped condition. The Conservancy is funded primarily through membership donations. Its annual membership campaign is currently underway. It is presently raising funds to conserve the Chautauqua Lake’s most important remaining natural shoreline habitats, undertake programs to address the root causes of the conditions that fuel lake plant growth, and manage its preserves. It is the only local organization conserving lands in perpetuity for these purposes. Please contact the Conservancy at 664-2166 to join!