

Some Habits of the North Island Tomtit

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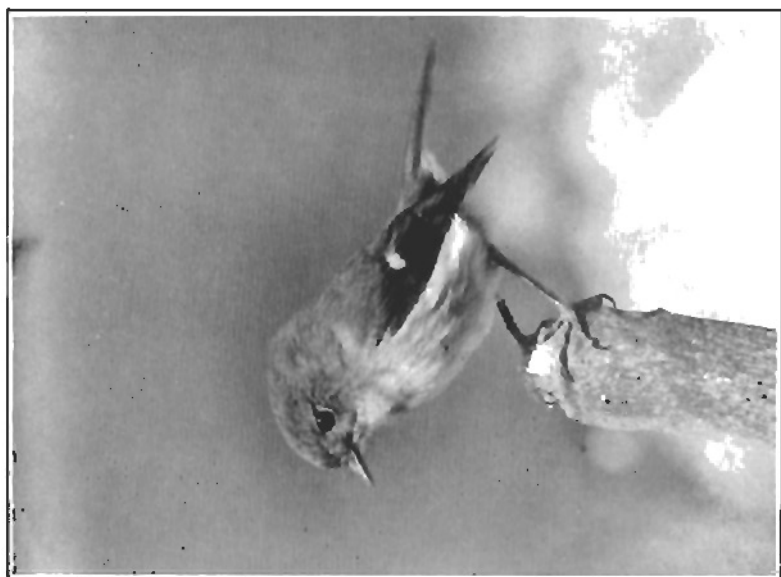
In the following notes I endeavour to give as near as possible the life history of the North Island Tomtit (*Myiomoira toitoi*), my observations being taken at Kapiti, where I have had excellent opportunities of studying the habits of this engaging and friendly little bird. Taking into consideration that individual birds may vary somewhat in character, the habits of the pair that has been under special notice may not correspond exactly with those of another pair in minor particulars.

Although a bird of the bush, the Tomtit spends much of its time in the open spaces immediately adjoining the wooded tracts, and as our cottage is within a chain or two of the bush, a pair of these birds is frequently around the garden, and seems quite as much at home sitting on a wire clothes-line, a spade handle, or a fence post, as on the branch or bole of a tree.

Though small the male Tomtit is a conspicuous bird, with glossy black head and back and wings, white breast, white mark on wings and a white line over beak. Where the male bird is black the female is grey, and where his markings are white hers are lighter grey, so that the sexes are easily distinguishable. The young soon show the distinguishing colours in a modified form, the white line over the beak being the last of the uniform to appear. The male has a cheery little song or whistle which he repeats without much variation at frequent intervals, chiefly in the spring time. Although comprising only a few notes he sings these with so much vigour that it cannot fail to please. The female may very occasionally be heard singing the same short song, but in so low and subdued a tone as to be almost inaudible. I have only heard her sing when she is near, or attending to, her young. The call notes of both birds are, at times, surprisingly loud and piercing, and repeated rapidly, with widely-opened mouth, three or four times in succession. When nest-building is in progress the birds keep in touch with one another with similar notes, but not nearly so loudly uttered and using them but singly, one calling and the other answering until they come together.

The same pair of Tomtits apparently stays about the same area all their lives. The birds resent the presence of another of their kind within their fenceless domain, the male fiercely chasing the trespasser, and causing him to take hurriedly the shortest cut for home. The range of their territory is quite extensive for small birds, maybe ten or more acres.

Nesting operations begin rather early in the season, sometimes during the last week in August. Often a hole



Female Tomtit.



Male Tomtit.

Photos by A. S. Wilkinson, R.A.O.C.

in a tree is chosen, sometimes a sheltered cleft in a bank or rock, and sometimes they build their cosy nest in the branches of a tree, generally choosing a low and compact one. The nest is, I believe, built entirely by the female, the male supplying her with food while she works. He helps her to select the site, and it is amusing to watch him pop into a hole in a tree, and to hear him calling to his mate to come in and inspect it also. I have seen him, too, sit in a nest that she had built and then for some reason discarded, perhaps to test it and tempt her back to it again, or to reassure her of its suitability.

The material used for the construction of the nest is composed principally of moss and soft scraps of thin bark, bound together with cobwebs, and lined softly inside with feathers. When complete, the nest, viewed from the outside, appears quite a bulky home for the size of the birds that are to occupy it, but the interior cup is small and there is no room to spare when the inmates are feathered. The accompanying photograph will show the shape better than a description in words. Some nests are much better built than others. Three or four eggs are usually laid—white ground with a liberal spotting of tiny dark-brown specks, mostly at the larger end. The hen bird does most, or probably all of the incubating, sitting on the eggs for about 17 days, which seems an unusually long period for so small a bird. She leaves them frequently in response to a call from her mate at intervals of about a quarter of an hour, when he carries food for her. She generally flies to a neighbouring tree to receive it from him, not letting him come right to the nest, although sometimes he does come to the nest. He puts the food—an insect of some kind—into her mouth, she fluttering her wings in the manner of young birds when being fed. Then, if incubation has not advanced very far, she may stay off for several minutes, catching food for herself and taking exercise. Later she will stay away from her eggs just long enough to swallow that which her mate brought her, before flying back and snuggling down in her cosy nest till only her beak and beady black eye may be seen over the edge.

When the young are hatched both parents carry food and occasionally the male will give his catch to the female to feed to them. He is often more cautious about approaching the nest when under observation than she is, and will hover around with a wriggling insect in his mouth for a considerable time before venturing to deliver it to the ever-hungry inmates. This is not, I think, through fear for himself, but for precaution against disclosing the vicinity of the nest with its precious brood, for, when not near the nest, the cock bird is a very fearless and friendly little fellow, and will approach to within a very few feet of an observer, darting almost to one's feet to pick up a grub.

It appears just the reverse with the hen; when the young need food, or when the nest is being inspected, she will fly up courageously, making angry little snapping noises, with erected head feathers and ruffled wings, darting swiftly past and almost touching one's face, sometimes even alighting on the intruder's head or shoulder, finally slipping into the nest, covering the eggs or young from further inspection. This is real bravery and cannot but incite great admiration for the small grey bird. At other times, when not having young to defend, the female Tomtit is a retiring little thing and does not very often wander from her bush retreat, or bring herself under notice. She, however, will visit the garden sometimes, generally in company with her mate, and enjoy the grubs as they are turned up by the spade. It is surprising how quickly they will notice when the garden is being dug or hoed, and will come back again and again for insects, missing nothing with their bright black eyes. Young Tomtits stay in the nest until about 17 or 18 days old. After they leave they are encouraged by their parents to mount higher into nearby trees. They do this by easy stages, taking only short fluttering flights at first, but soon becoming active, and flying with greater ease every hour. Even then they are still fed very frequently by their parents. They call incessantly for more, for Tomtits, both old and young, have large appetites and consume an enormous quantity of insects for such tiny birds. After helping her mate to attend to the wants of the growing family for about ten days, the hen Tomtit begins to build again, and leaves the work of feeding almost entirely to the cock bird. He carries on very faithfully with the job, providing them with food all day long, but he is not heard singing so merrily now: he is much too busy. His building mate must miss having her food caught and carried to her as when she was busy with the construction of the first nest, but there is no shirking by either bird; both perform their duty continuously and well. The male reeds the young another week or two, giving them less and less attention, and by this time they can catch a certain amount for themselves, although they evidently much prefer to have it done for them. By the time the second brood is reared, which may be well into February, the adult Tomtits are beginning to moult and go into retirement, the young following them, but instead of food they receive chastisement, the father bird being particularly fierce with them. A noticeable feature in connection with the rearing of the broods is the way the young at times are separated, each parent taking their share of the family to mind, and it seems to be the most usual thing for the mother bird to provide for the little hens, and the father for the young cock birds.



Female Tomtit leaving nesting hole.



Nest and eggs of Tomtit.

Photos by Mrs. Amy K. Wilkinson, R.A.O.U.