

YOUR AD HERE »

Get Wild: Chickadee-dee-dee, how do ya do it?

News [FOLLOW NEWS](#) | Dec 15, 2023

Karn Stiegelmeier
Get Wild



A mountain chickadee eats some seed near Silverthorne in December 2023.

Karn Stiegelmeier/Courtesy photo

We have an abundance of black capped and mountain chickadees throughout the winter. How do they do it? They are all of 3.5 ounces and 3-5 inches long – and very active!

Chickadees are in the family of paridae, which includes seven chickadee species and three species of titmouse species that are similar but larger and not commonly seen in Summit. Black-capped chickadees are found all over North America. Mountain chickadees are so named because they live in the mountains of Western U.S. and Canada. The black caps are easy to identify, and the mountains look just the same but with a white eyebrow through the cap. Unlike most birds, the males and females look alike, so you can't tell them

They don't have ski boots or mittens or wool hats. But they do have a nice down jacket. They do have a chubbier look in the winter, which is not more weight, but fluffed out feathers that give the bird a fluffy ball look, creating more insulation around the body, helping to maintain heat. My hands were freezing for an hour with gloves on after falling in the snow today. How do the chickadees maintain the ability to keep perching on icy branches when it is 5 degrees and windy? Researchers say they have a counter-current exchange system that allows blood flow from a bird's arteries to its feet. The warmth is passed to the veins, which return blood to the heart. I have a big heart pumping hard when I'm skiing hard, but often my hands are still too cold. Chickadees are amazing, and they seem so happy, saying "dee-dee" all the time.

Chickadees are food-caching birds. I'm obsessed with feeding them every morning because I worry about them staying warm, and I don't want seed left for foxes or other mammals to get to later. Seeds are high in fat content and very helpful for their survival. Where do they cache those seeds? You will commonly see them grab one seed and fly off to their seed cache in the little crevices in tree bark or abandoned woodpecker cavities or bird houses. One bird will hide as many as 80,000 seeds in the summer, which they will go back to in the winter. One reason they can survive is they are incredibly smart! Researchers say they have very high cognitive abilities or special memory of locations. In particular, they must remember many locations of stashed seeds. This creates larger hippocampus and more neurons in our cold weather surviving chickadees than in the chickadees living in milder climates. Would you be able to find your stash of 80,000 seeds?

Our Summit chickadees must stuff themselves with enough seeds or frozen insects to survive long nights of single digit or below-zero temperatures. Our chickadees also have abilities to go into regulated hypothermia enabling them to lower body temperature in a controlled manner 12-15 degrees below normal daytime temperature of about 108 degrees. This saves metabolic energy. What would my doctor say if my temperature was only 80 degrees?

This year's Audubon Christmas bird count is Dec. 30. Please help count our bird numbers and species. Volunteers count birds within defined 15-mile circles. The data from all over the country are used for tracking those same areas in subsequent years. Contact Sherie Sobke, sherie.alpinegardens@gmail.com, if you are interested in participating in this year's bird count.

SUMMIT DAILY

Support Local Journalism

As a Summit Daily News reader, you make our work possible.

Summit Daily is embarking on a multiyear project to digitize its archives going back to 1989 and make them available to the public in partnership with the Colorado Historic Newspapers Collection. The full project is expected to cost about \$165,000. All donations made in 2023 will go directly toward this project.

Every contribution, no matter the size, will make a difference.

[DONATE](#)