



GOLDCREST

The Goldcrest is our smallest native bird, found mainly in coniferous woodland and often heard more than seen, as it is only up to 3.5 inches long and weighs less than a quarter of an ounce, or 5-7 g. It is always on the move in the dense foliage, well camouflaged as it flickers round the branches, hovering and picking insects and spiders from the tree. They can also hang upside down when searching for food beneath leaves, and have very sharp, thin beaks that act like tweezers. Usually well hidden in conifers, they sometimes visit the ground to peck seeds and insects from snow covered surfaces.

Well named, it has a bright yellow or orange crown on the top of its head, bordered in black, and this bright crown is raised into a small crest when alarmed. They have a high pitched song and alarm call.

What amazes me for such a tiny bird, is that in our autumn, our resident population can increase fivefold by large numbers of Goldcrests migrating across the North Sea to spend winter here. They fly here from the Baltic, Finland and even Russia, covering over 600 miles in one week.

They are effective breeding birds, with 2 broods a year of up to 20 nestlings in one season. They have also benefitted from widespread conifer plantations across the UK, with the fast growing trees used in lumber and paper production. Both parents make the small spherical nest, with 3 layers for insulation, made with cobwebs, lichen, moss and lined with feathers and hair. It is so small and well concealed in the dense foliage, it is rarely predated.

They feed all day in autumn, building up energy for the cooler nights, huddling together in thick cover to keep warm. I would love to see that! I have seen Goldcrests in conifer woodland, but it was mostly an impression of fluttering movements as they restlessly foraged for insects.

The Firecrest is another tiny bird, closely related to the Goldcrest, similarly secretive, but they do sometimes interbreed. Firecrests are less numerous here, but are found mainly in the South East. They migrate from central Europe, but prefer more open mixed woodland, and may also inhabit gardens with exotic conifers. When they feed together with Goldcrests they tend to feed lower down in the trees than the Goldcrest, so leaving space for each other to hopefully find enough food. Sensible and kind, this is a lovely lesson for us all from these very small birds.