

Chickamouse: Probable hybridization between Tufted Titmouse and Black-capped Chickadee in DeWitt County

By Matt Fraker

On 12 March 2010, I was running my weekly survey of the Clinton Lake area in De Witt County. As I was exploring the northwestern region of the lake, I encountered a mixed flock of birds in the cover to the left of the road. The habitat here is second-growth forest that is relatively young with very thick Asian honeysuckle understory. I stopped and rolled down my window and began "pishing" and immediately a Tufted Titmouse (*Baeolophus bicolor*) and a Black-capped Chickadee (*Poecile atricapillus*) popped up at eye level on some branches sticking out over the road. Both birds were approximately 15 feet away. I looked at both birds with my binoculars and realized that the "chickadee" was aberrant. I took a series of photographs and saw that the bird was a probable hybrid Tufted Titmouse x Black-capped Chickadee. I forwarded iPhone pictures of the bird to Matthew Winks and Greg Neise. The sighting lasted about 20 seconds.

The bird's plumage clearly shared features of both Black-capped Chickadee and Tufted Titmouse. Chickadee features actually seemed to dominate in the field and included the grayish-green color to the back regions, the face pattern with the capped appearance, dusky throat, and the diffuse buffy color through the breast and abdomen.

Tufted Titmouse features included the doe-eyed facial expression, the bill structure, and the presence of a crest. The placement of the eye was intermediate in location. The one feature not shared by either parent species was the bright orange nasal tufts.

Carolina Chickadee (*Poecile carolinensis*) perhaps cannot be ruled out, but considering the rarity of Carolina Chickadees in this area, Black-capped simply presents a much greater likelihood. The amount of buffy color diffusion in this bird's breast and abdomen would also support Black-capped Chickadee.

A Black-crested Titmouse (*Baeolophus atricristatus*) x Tufted Titmouse hybrid simply does not explain certain features of this bird (the capped appearance, the facial pattern, the grayish-green back, the diffusion of color through the undersides, and probably not the brown nasal tufts, though Black-crested Titmouse do have a pale area here). This combination also does not explain the point blank facial impression that this bird initially presented as a Black-capped Chickadee. This, on top of the likelihood of getting Black-crested Titmouse genes to DeWitt County, Illinois, rules out Black-crested Titmouse as a co-parent.

An online search for other records of this hybrid combination resulted in very few reports. Cockrum (1952) has the following:

1. *Parus bicolor* Linnaeus X *Parus atricapillus* Linnaeus. Tufted Titmouse X Black-capped Chickadee. (No source was noted for this entry in original bibliography).
2. *Lophophanes bicolor* X *Parus atricapillus*, Ridgway, 1876:169.
3. *Parus bicolor* X *Parus atricapillus*, Suchet, 1897:301.

These same two sourced references (Ridgway and Suchet) are the only two reports noted in McCarthy (2006). Pyle (1997) notes that hybrids among these two species are "possible". The following website documented a similar hybrid with a photo: <http://www.wbu.com/chipperwoods/photos/hybridtt.htm>. Tim Spahr (per. comm.) in an ID Frontiers web discussion concerning this bird noted the following, "There is a record of this combo from Martha's Vineyard by Vern Laux." Marshall Iliff (per. comm.) in a listserv discussion with Michael Retter, also mentions such hybrids at that location: "I assume you are also aware that on Martha's Vineyard, MA, where BCCH is resident and TUTI is a recent colonist, hybrids have been found several times."