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BEST OF HEAR-
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LIVING

Pishing for elusive kinglets

Tiny birds are difficult to spot . . . unless you know how to call them

Walking along the Trans-Canada trail between Jackson Park and Lily Lake the other day, I heard some high-pitched call notes coming from a dense tangle of vines and dead branches at the base of an uprooted tree. Curious to confirm what they were, I stopped to make a "pssh" sound to coax the birds into view. Within seconds, two gems of the fall migration popped out, giving me a great look at them. They were golden-crowned kinglets, the aptly named "little kings" that tend to go unnoticed even by some experienced birders.



Drew Monkman
OUR CHANGING SEASONS

A little later that same afternoon, I also heard and eventually saw the golden-crowned's more non-descript cousin, the ruby-crowned kinglet. Both species are common birds in the Kawarthas, especially during the spring and fall migrations. They are both confirmed nesters in our area, too, although probably in small numbers.

One reason most people aren't familiar with kinglets is that they don't come to our feeders. The reason is simple; kinglets are almost exclusively insectivores. However, the chances are good that migrating kinglets have been gleaned food from the trees and shrubs around your house all month long without you ever knowing it.

The kinglets' size and colour doesn't make them stand out, either. Kinglets are even smaller than chickadees, weighing less than a quarter ounce. Only the ruby-throated hummingbird is smaller. In fact, kinglets are so small and light that they can get caught in the hooks of the seed heads of burdock plants (wild rhubarb) and die. As for colour, both kinglet species are essentially olive-green birds with white wing-bars, a short tail, and a frustrating habit of being in constant movement. A curious behaviour that sets them apart from all other birds is that they continually flick their wings. Their wing-flicking, along with a habit of hovering at the tips of branches to reach hard-to-get-at insects has inspired some people to call them "butterfly birds."

If you can get a good look at a kinglet, telling the two species apart is not difficult. The golden-crowns have brightly-coloured caps outlined in black. The crown is easily observable if the top of the bird's head is in view. The female's cap is yellow, while the male's is yellow with an orange-red crest in the middle. The crest is usually hidden, however, except when raised to show excitement. I remember one of my students bringing a dead kinglet in to class at school one day. The kids couldn't get over the brilliance of the crown feathers and how they seemed to glow like a beacon.

Ruby-crowned kinglets, on the other hand, are most easily identified by a distinctive white ring around the eye. If

you can get a good look when the male bird is agitated, you may also see glimpses of his ruby-coloured crest. It will usually appear as a thin red stripe. Most of the time, however, other feathers hide the crest.

Given the tiny size of these birds, you might expect that their songs and call notes would be insignificant, too. Well, this is true for the golden-crowned. Its

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Frank Chapman, pioneer ornithologist, on the song of the golden-crowned kinglet

call note is a very high, thin, slightly buzzy, "zee-zee-zee." If you have hearing loss in the higher frequencies, you may not be able to hear it all. Its song is equally unexceptional, consisting only of a series of very high, thin notes followed by descending chattering. The song of the ruby-crowned kinglet, however, is a surprisingly loud, long and exuberant series of whistles and warbles. It always impresses me that such as big song can come from such a small bird. Dr. Frank Chapman, a early American ornithologist and pioneer writer of field guides once wrote: "The song is mellow and flute-like, and loud enough to be heard at several hundred yards; an intricate warble past imitation or description, and rendered so



KARL EGRESSY photos

The golden-crowned kinglet (top) and ruby-crowned kinglet (left) are two of North America's smallest birds, weighing less than a quarter ounce. Their tiny size and habit of staying deep inside coniferous trees and shrubs to search for the insects they eat mean few people recognize kinglets.

admirably that I never hear it now without feeling an impulse to applaud . . . one is reminded of a chorister with the voice of an adult soprano." Migrant ruby-crowns can easily be heard calling in May as they pass through the Kawarthas en route to their main nesting grounds in northern Ontario.

Kinglets are a bit of an evolutionary enigma. For a long time they were thought to be related to either Old World warblers (Sylviinae) or to the titmice family (Paridae). However, DNA studies have disproved this. Kinglets are different and unique in the bird world and, for the time being at least, seem to constitute their own group. Surprisingly, there are even substantial genetic differences between the golden-crowned and ruby-crowned kinglets themselves. As it turns out, the golden-crowned is nearly genetically identical to the goldcrest, a European kinglet. The two may even be the same species.

You still have time to see golden-crowned kinglets this fall - small numbers of these birds even hang around all winter - but most of the ruby-crowns have already passed through on their way to wintering grounds from southern New England to Mexico. Seeing kinglets often requires the use of pishing, a sound made by birders that attracts birds. You might think of it as a human-avian communication along the lines of "Psst... look this way." Just like someone in a crowd checking to see if he or she is the one being "psst" at,

some bird species are incredibly curious about the sound, too. Pishing is typically used in an attempt to coax birds to come in closer in order to get a better look at them. However, it can also be used to find out if there are birds present - but completely silent and invisible - in a thicket or dense clump of trees. In this way, pishing can make birds seem to magically appear out of nowhere.

So, how do you pish? Quite simply, by quickly saying "pssh, pssh, pssh" for about 10 seconds non-stop, taking a short break, and then doing it again until you see or hear that you're getting a response. It almost sounds like a non-stop attempt to silence someone who is talking when they should be listening. Pssh! If you keep it up long enough, you can sometimes have chickadees coming in almost close enough to almost touch! Other species like nuthatches, woodpeckers, warblers, vireos, and kinglets will also approach, although usually not quite as close. I find that the mistake that beginning "pishers" make is that they don't keep the pishing up long enough or don't do it loud enough. There is another form of pishing known as "squeaking." To squeak, hold your index and middle fingers tightly together and noisily kiss the middle section until you get a high-pitched, squeaky sound. I have even attracted weasels and foxes using this technique!

Pishing is thought to work because it sounds somewhat similar to the scold

calls of chickadees. Scold calls are made during mobbing behaviour. Mobbing occurs when groups of birds noisily pursue a flying predator or harass a perched one. Crows, grackles, and chickadees are well-known mobbing species. When other birds hear the scold calls, they fly in to establish the nature of the potential threat and may become part of the "mob." It is not clear why predators don't simply turn on their annoying tormentors and grab one for an easy meal. You would think this would put a quick end to the pestering. The fact that owls and hawks don't do this suggests that surprise is an essential element in raptor hunting.

By late fall and throughout the winter, kinglets are most often found in thickets of coniferous trees, especially spruce and fir. Begin to pish when you hear chickadee calls or, if you can recognize them, when you hear the calls of kinglets themselves. Don't be surprised if you are quickly surrounded by a mixed-species flock that might include downy and hairy woodpeckers, nuthatches, chickadees, brown creepers, and hopefully kinglets. If you don't pish, your chances of actually seeing kinglets are quite slim. They simply remain almost invisible in the heavy cover.

It is remarkable that a small number of golden-crowned kinglets overwinter in the Kawarthas each year. That they can make it through our cold winters seems to defy the laws of physics and physiology. You would think the fat reserves of such a small bird would be too small to get it through a long winter night. Those that overwinter here never stop from dawn to dusk in their search for insect food. Studies of their stomach contents in winter have shown that they subsist on tiny frozen caterpillars. They also huddle at night in groups of two or three in order to save energy.

Still, there is a high level of winter mortality. In fact, it is believed that an amazing 87% of the kinglet population is weeded out every year from one cause or another. Bernd Heinrich, in "Winter World," calls the kinglet as close to an annual bird (in analogy to annual plants that regenerate each year only by seeds) as any bird gets. However, this incredibly high mortality rate is compensated by the kinglet's nesting behaviour.

Whereas the majority of songbirds have four to five eggs per clutch, kinglets lay an amazing eight to eleven. In fact, the eggs actually sit in the nest in two layers - one layer on top of the other! The nests are notoriously difficult to find because they are located high in spruce trees and suspended under the branches where they are protected by a thick screen of needles and twigs. And it's not as if kinglets are satisfied with just one nest. They are simultaneously busy with a second nest that contains the same number of young! A study in Minnesota discovered that nesting success is over 80%, which is exceptionally high. This ability to quickly rebuild its numbers each year is clearly the kinglet's saving grace and, in this case at least, an example of how evolution sometimes cares little about the survival of the individual but everything about the survival of the species.

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