

= Common chiffchaff =

The common chiffchaff , or simply the chiffchaff , ( *Phylloscopus collybita* ) is a common and widespread leaf warbler which breeds in open woodlands throughout northern and temperate Europe and Asia .

It is a migratory passerine which winters in southern and western Europe , southern Asia and north Africa . Greenish @-@ brown above and off @-@ white below , it is named onomatopoeically for its simple chiff @-@ chaff song . It has a number of subspecies , some of which are now treated as full species . The female builds a domed nest on or near the ground , and assumes most of the responsibility for brooding and feeding the chicks , whilst the male has little involvement in nesting , but defends his territory against rivals , and attacks potential predators .

A small insectivorous bird , it is subject to predation by mammals , such as cats and mustelids , and birds , particularly hawks of the genus *Accipiter* . Its large range and population mean that its status is secure , although one subspecies is probably extinct .

= = Taxonomy = =

The British naturalist Gilbert White was one of the first people to separate the similar @-@ looking common chiffchaff , willow warbler and wood warbler by their songs , as detailed in 1789 in *The Natural History and Antiquities of Selborne* , but the common chiffchaff was first formally described as *Sylvia collybita* by French ornithologist Louis Vieillot in 1817 in his *Nouveau Dictionnaire d'Histoire Naturelle* .

Described by German zoologist Heinrich Boie in 1826 , the genus *Phylloscopus* contains about 50 species of small insectivorous Old World woodland warblers which are either greenish or brown above and yellowish , white or buff below . The genus was formerly part of the Old World warbler family *Sylviidae* , but has now been split off as a separate family *Phylloscopidae* . The chiffchaff 's closest relatives , other than former subspecies , are a group of leaf warblers which similarly lack crown stripes , a yellow rump or obvious wing bars ; they include the willow , Bonelli 's , wood and plain leaf warblers .

The common chiffchaff has three still commonly accepted subspecies , together with some from the Iberian Peninsula , the Canary Islands , and the Caucasus which are now more often treated as full species .

= = = Subspecies = = =

*P. c. collybita* , the nominate form , breeds in Europe east to Poland and Bulgaria , and is described below . It mainly winters in the south of its breeding range around the Mediterranean and in North Africa . It has been expanding its range northwards into Scandinavia since 1970 and close to the southern edge of the range of *P. c. abietinus* .

*P. c. abietinus* occurs in Scandinavia and northern Russia , and winters from southeastern Europe and northeastern Africa east to Iraq and western Iran . It is intermediate in appearance between *P. c. tristis* and *P. c. collybita* , being grey @-@ washed olive @-@ green above with a pale yellow supercilium , and underparts whiter than in *P. c. collybita* , but it has very similar vocalisations to the nominate subspecies . Due to individual variation , it can be difficult to reliably separate *P. c. abietinus* and *P. c. collybita* outside their main breeding and wintering ranges . Some common chiffchaffs in the Middle East are browner and have a more disyllabic swee @-@ hu call than *P. c. abietinus* , and may belong to a poorly known taxon " *brevirostris* " ; further research is needed to clarify the affinities of this form .

*P. ( c . ) tristis* , the Siberian chiffchaff , breeds in Siberia east of the Pechora River and winters in the lower Himalayas . It is also regularly recorded in western Europe in winter , and it is likely that the numbers involved have been underestimated due to uncertainties over identification criteria , lack of good data and recording policies ( Sweden and Finland only accept trapped birds ) . It is a dull subspecies , grey or brownish above and whitish below , with little yellow in the plumage , and

the buff @-@ white supercilium is often longer than in the western subspecies . It has a higher pitched suitsistsuisit song and a short high @-@ pitched cheet call . It is sometimes considered to be a full species due to its distinctive plumage and vocalisations , being similar to *P. s. sindianus* in these respects . Nominate *P. c. collybita* and *P. c. tristis* do not recognize each other 's songs . Pending resolution of the status of *P. ( c . ) fulvescens* , which is found where the ranges of *P. c. abietinus* and *P. c. tristis* connect and may or may not be a hybrid between these , *tristis* is maintained in *P. collybita* .

= = = Former subspecies = = =

*P. ibericus* , the Iberian chiffchaff is brighter , greener on the rump , and yellower below than *P. collybita* , and has a tit @-@ tit @-@ tit @-@ tswee @-@ tswee song . It was initially named *P. brehmii* , but the type specimen of that taxon is not an Iberian chiffchaff . This species is found in Portugal and Spain , west of a line stretching roughly from the western Pyrenees via the mountains of central Spain to the Mediterranean ; the Iberian and common chiffchaffs co @-@ occur in a narrow band along this line . Apart from the northernmost section , the precise course of the contact zone is not well documented . A long @-@ distance migrant , this species winters in western Africa . It differs from *P. c. collybita* in vocalisations , external morphology , and mtDNA sequences . There is hybridization in the contact zone , almost always between male *P. ibericus* and female *P. c. collybita* , and hybrids apparently show much decreased fitness ; hybrid females appear to be sterile according to Haldane 's Rule . Regarding the latter aspect , it is interesting to note that the Iberian chiffchaff apparently is the oldest lineage of chiffchaffs and quite distinct from the common chiffchaff .

*P. canariensis* , the Canary Islands chiffchaff is a non @-@ migratory species formerly occurring on the major Canary Islands , which is differentiated from *P. collybita* by morphology , vocalisations and genetic characteristics , and , of course , is not sympatric with any other chiffchaffs . The nominate western subspecies *P. c. canariensis* of El Hierro , La Palma , La Gomera , Tenerife , and Gran Canaria is smaller than common chiffchaff , and has shorter , rounder wings . It is olive @-@ brown above and has a buff breast and flanks ; it has a rich deep chip @-@ cheep @-@ cheep @-@ chip @-@ chip @-@ cheep song , and a call similar to the nominate race . The eastern *P. c. exsul* of Lanzarote and possibly Fuerteventura is paler above and less rufous below than its western relative , and had a harsher call ; it might have been a distinct species , but it became extinct in 1986 at latest , probably much earlier . The reasons for its extinction are unclear , but it appears always to have been scarce and localised , occurring only in the Haria Valley of Lanzarote .

*P. sindianus* , the mountain chiffchaff , is found in the Caucasus ( *P. s. lorenzii* ) and Himalayas ( *P. s. sindianus* ) , and is an altitudinal migrant , moving to lower levels in winter . The nominate subspecies is similar to *P. c. tristis* , but with a finer darker bill , browner upperparts and buff flanks ; its song is almost identical to *P. collybita* , but the call is a weak psew . *P. s. lorenzii* is warmer and darker brown than the nominate race ; it is sympatric with common chiffchaff in a small area in the Western Caucasus , but interbreeding occurs rarely , if ever . The mountain chiffchaff differs from *tristis* in vocalisations , external morphology , and mtDNA sequences . Its two subspecies appear to be distinct vocally , and also show some difference in mtDNA sequences ; they are maintained at subspecies rank pending further research .

= = = Etymology = = =

The common chiffchaff 's English name is onomatopoeic , referring to the repetitive chiff @-@ chaff song of the European subspecies . There are similar names in some other European languages , such as the Dutch Tjiftjaf and the German Zilpzalp and Welsh siff @-@ saff . The binomial name is of Greek origin ; *Phylloscopus* comes from *phyllon* / ?????? , " leaf " , and *skoepo* / ?????? , " to look at " or " to see " , since this genus comprises species that spend much of their time feeding in trees , while *collybita* is a corruption of *kollubistes* , " money changer " , the song being likened to the jingling of coins .

## == Description ==

The common chiffchaff is a small, dumpy, 10 ? 12 centimetres ( 4 in ) long leaf warbler . The male weighs 7 ? 8 grammes ( 0 @.@ 28 ? 0 @.@ 31 oz ) , and the female 6 ? 7 grammes ( 0 @.@ 25 ? 0 @.@ 28 oz ) . The spring adult of the western nominate subspecies *P. c. collybita* has brown @-@ washed dull green upperparts , off @-@ white underparts becoming yellowish on the flanks , and a short whitish supercilium . It has dark legs , a fine dark bill , and short primary projection ( extension of the flight feathers beyond the folded wing ) . As the plumage wears , it gets duller and browner , and the yellow on the flanks tends to be lost , but after the breeding season there is a prolonged complete moult before migration . The newly fledged juvenile is browner above than the adult , with yellow @-@ white underparts , but moults about 10 weeks after acquiring its first plumage . After moulting , both the adult and the juvenile have brighter and greener upperparts and a paler supercilium .

This warbler gets its name from its simple distinctive song , a repetitive cheerful chiff @-@ chaff . This song is one of the first avian signs that spring has returned . Its call is a hweet , less disyllabic than the hooet of the willow warbler or hu @-@ it of the western Bonelli 's warbler .

The song differs from that of the Iberian chiffchaff , which has a shorter djup djup djup wheep wheep chittichittichittichitta . However , mixed singers occur in the hybridisation zone and elsewhere , and can be difficult to allocate to species .

When not singing , the common chiffchaff can be difficult to distinguish from other leaf warblers with greenish upperparts and whitish underparts , particularly the willow warbler . However , that species has a longer primary projection , a sleeker , brighter appearance and generally pale legs . Bonelli 's warbler ( *P. bonelli* ) might be confused with the common chiffchaff subspecies *tristis* , but it has a plain face and green in the wings . The common chiffchaff also has rounded wings in flight , and a diagnostic tail movement consisting of a dip , then sideways wag , that distinguishes it from other *Phylloscopus* warblers and gives rise to the name " tailwagger " in India .

Perhaps the greatest challenge is distinguishing non @-@ singing birds of the nominate subspecies from Iberian chiffchaff in the field . In Great Britain and the Netherlands , all accepted records of vagrant Iberian chiffchaffs relate to singing males .

## == Distribution and habitat ==

The common chiffchaff breeds across Europe and Asia east to eastern Siberia and north to about 70 ° N , with isolated populations in northwest Africa , northern and western Turkey and northwestern Iran . It is migratory , but it is one of the first passerine birds to return to its breeding areas in the spring and among the last to leave in late autumn . When breeding , it is a bird of open woodlands with some taller trees and ground cover for nesting purposes . These trees are typically at least 5 metres ( 16 ft ) high , with undergrowth that is an open , poor to medium mix of grasses , bracken , nettles or similar plants . Its breeding habitat is quite specific , and even near relatives do not share it ; for example , the willow warbler ( *P. trochilus* ) prefers younger trees , while the wood warbler ( *P. sibilatrix* ) prefers less undergrowth . In winter , the common chiffchaff uses a wider range of habitats including scrub , and is not so dependent on trees . It is often found near water , unlike the willow warbler which tolerates drier habitats . There is an increasing tendency to winter in western Europe well north of the traditional areas , especially in coastal southern England and the mild urban microclimate of London . These overwintering common chiffchaffs include some visitors of the eastern subspecies *abietinus* and *tristis* , so they are certainly not all birds which have bred locally , although some undoubtedly are .

## == Behaviour ==

## == Territory ==

The male common chiffchaff is highly territorial during the breeding season , with a core territory typically 20 metres ( 66 ft ) across , which is fiercely defended against other males . Other small birds may also be attacked . The male is inquisitive and fearless , attacking even dangerous predators like the stoat if they approach the nest , as well as egg @-@ thieves like the Eurasian jay . His song , given from a favoured prominent vantage point , appears to be used to advertise an established territory and contact the female , rather than as a paternity guard strategy .

Beyond the core territory , there is a larger feeding range which is variable in size , but typically ten or more times the area of the breeding territory . It is believed that the female has a larger feeding range than the male . After breeding has finished , this species abandons its territory , and may join small flocks including other warblers prior to migration .

#### = = = Breeding = = =

The male common chiffchaff returns to its breeding territory two or three weeks before the female and immediately starts singing to establish ownership and attract a female . When a female is located , the male will use a slow butterfly @-@ like flight as part of the courtship ritual , but once a pair @-@ bond has been established , other females will be driven from the territory . The male has little involvement in the nesting process other than defending the territory . The female 's nest is built on or near the ground in a concealed site in brambles , nettles or other dense low vegetation . The domed nest has a side entrance , and is constructed from coarse plant material such as dead leaves and grass , with finer material used on the interior before the addition of a lining of feathers . The typical nest is 12 @.@ 5 centimetres ( 5 in ) high and 11 centimetres ( 4 in ) across .

The clutch is two to seven ( normally five or six ) cream @-@ coloured eggs which have tiny ruddy , purple or blackish spots and are about 1 @.@ 5 centimetres ( 0 @.@ 6 in ) long and 1 @.@ 2 centimetres ( 0 @.@ 5 in ) across . They are incubated by the female for 13 ? 14 days before hatching as naked , blind altricial chicks . The female broods and feeds the chicks for another 14 ? 15 days until they fledge . The male rarely participates in feeding , although this sometimes occurs , especially when bad weather limits insect supplies or if the female disappears . After fledging , the young stay in the vicinity of the nest for three to four weeks , and are fed by and roost with the female , although these interactions reduce after approximately the first 14 days . In the north of the range there is only time to raise one brood , due to the short summer , but a second brood is common in central and southern areas .

Although pairs stay together during the breeding season and polygamy is uncommon , even if the male and female return to the same site in the following year there is no apparent recognition or fidelity . Interbreeding with other species , other than those formerly considered as subspecies of *P. collybita* , is rare , but a few examples are known of hybridisation with the willow warbler . Such hybrids give mixed songs , but the latter alone is not proof of interspecific breeding .

#### = = = Feeding = = =

Like most Old World warblers , this small species is insectivorous , moving restlessly though foliage or briefly hovering . It has been recorded as taking insects , mainly flies , from more than 50 families , along with other small and medium @-@ sized invertebrates . It will take the eggs and larvae of butterflies and moths , particularly those of the winter moth . The chiffchaff has been estimated to require about one @-@ third of its weight in insects daily , and it feeds almost continuously in the autumn to put on extra fat as fuel for the long migration flight .

#### = = Predators and threats = =

As with most small birds , mortality in the first year of life is high , but adults aged three to four years are regularly recorded , and the record is more than seven years . Eggs , chicks and fledglings of this ground @-@ nesting species are taken by stoats , weasels and crows such as the European

magpie , and the adults are hunted by birds of prey , particularly the sparrowhawk . Small birds are also at the mercy of the weather , particularly when migrating , but also on the breeding and wintering grounds .

The common chiffchaff is occasionally a host of brood parasitic cuckoos , including the common and Horsfield 's cuckoos , but it recognises and rejects non @-@ mimetic eggs and is therefore only rarely successfully brood @-@ parasitised . Like other passerine birds , the common chiffchaff can also acquire intestinal nematode parasites and external ticks .

The main effect of humans on this species is indirect , through woodland clearance which affects the habitat , predation by cats , and collisions with windows , buildings and cars . Only the first of these has the potential to seriously affect populations , but given the huge geographical spread of *P. c. abietinus* and *P. c. tristis* , and woodland conservation policies in the range of *P. c. collybita* , the chiffchaff 's future seems assured .

= = Status = =

The common chiffchaff has an enormous range , with an estimated global extent of 10 million square kilometres ( 3 @.@ 8 million square miles ) and a population of 60 ? 120 million individuals in Europe alone . Although global population trends have not been quantified , the species is not believed to approach the thresholds for the population decline criterion of the IUCN Red List ( that is , declining more than 30 percent in ten years or three generations ) . For these reasons , the species is evaluated as " least concern " .

None of the major subspecies is under threat , but *exsul* , as noted above , is probably extinct . There is a slow population increase of common chiffchaff in the Czech Republic . The range of at least *P. c. collybita* seems to be expanding , with northward advances in Scotland , Norway and Sweden and a large population increase in Denmark .