

TITMICE

Family PARIDÆ

THE titmice are very frequently regarded as being closely related to the crows, but are more conveniently treated as a distinct family.

The bill is usually short and conical and rather deep, though this character varies, the nostrils are usually concealed by short bristly or velvety feathers, and the bristles at the gape are present but weak.

The wing has ten primaries, the first well developed, but not very long. The wing as a whole is rather weak and rounded; tail either square or slightly rounded or forked, usually not less than three-quarters the length of the wing.

Plumage soft, colour somewhat varied, but pure reds never present; sexes usually alike or nearly so; the young birds like the adults, but paler and duller. Many species are crested or have the feathers of the head very full.

The nests are usually pads of moss, feathers and the like, placed in holes in trees; the eggs are white or pinkish with numerous spots of reddish brown—the number in a clutch is rarely less than five.

The family comprises about a hundred species, occurring all over the world, except in South America and the Pacific. The birds are mostly sedentary, though one or two genera are in part migratory, and others perform limited movements in altitude on the mountain ranges on which they reside, according to season.

Only two species are known from Malaya, one, a form of the grey tit, is strictly confined to the mangrove forests, where it is by no means common, though widely distributed; the other, which is here described, is a somewhat aberrant form, considered by many ornithologists to be out of place in this family.

Melanochlora sultanea flavocristata

The Malay Sultan-Tit

Parus flavocristatus, Lafr., *Mag. de Zool.*, 1837, Cl. 2, pl. 80 (Îles de la Sonde, Sumatra).

Parus sultaneus, Gadow, *Cat. Birds, Brit. Mus.*, viii, 1883, p. 6.

Melanochlora sultanea (part), Oates, *Faun. Brit. Ind., Birds*, i., 1889, p. 241.

Melanochlora sultanea flavocristata, Stuart Baker, *Faun. Brit. Ind., Birds* (2nd ed.), i., 1922, p. 102.

Malay Name.—Serai serai.

Description.—With an elongated crest of narrow, bright yellow feathers in both sexes.

Adult male.—Head, pale yellow, the feathers much elongated, the lateral ones black on the outer webs. Lores and a stripe over the eye, ear coverts, sides of the head, throat and upper breast, and the whole of the upper surface, including the wings and tail, glossy black, with a greenish cast. Inner aspect of the wing, greyish black, the quills margined on their inner webs with greyish white; axillaries, pale yellow; under wing coverts, mingled black-and-yellow. Under surface, bright yellow. Thighs, black, the feathers tipped with yellow.

Adult female.—Distribution of colours as in the male but the yellow slightly paler; the mantle and back, dark, oily metallic green; the chin, throat and upper breast, dull olive-green.

Immature.—Like the female, but the crest shorter, and with fine, dark shaft lines; the throat darker and duller; the mantle, dingier, not so glossy, and the greater wing coverts with narrow, white or yellowish-white tips.

Soft Parts.—Iris, light hazel, dark brown, reddish brown or red; bill, black; feet, greenish lead, lavender-blue or bluish grey.

Dimensions.—Total length, 7 to 7·7 in.; wing, 3·8 to 4·3 in.; tail, 3·7 in.; tarsus, 0·9 in.; bill from gape, 0·65 to 0·7 in.

Range in the Malay Peninsula.—Throughout its length. Rather doubtfully on Penang, but not on the other islands.

Extralimital Range.—Tenasserim, Southern and Central Siam, and the southern parts of French Indo-China to South Annam; Sumatra. In northern French Indo-China the species shows much variability, and several local races have been distinguished. The Malayan race above described only differs from the typical form from the Himalayas, Burma and Northern Siam by the very slightly smaller size and the shorter less profuse crest. The tail is only very rarely tipped with white, which is of commoner occurrence in northern birds.

Nidification.—That of the local form, unknown. Baker describes a nest of the Himalayan race found in North Cachar on 17th May as “similar to that of a titmouse, a pad of moss with dense lining of cotton-down, placed in a crevice in a big bough of an oak. The eggs, seven in number [were white, boldly blotched with reddish brown] like those of a *Malacolophus* and measure about 0·76 by 0·60 in.”

Habits.—The sultan-tit is one of the typical submontane birds found in old forest from about 500 to 3500 ft. or a little over. It prefers glades where there is a certain amount of sun and light. Its habits are very much those of the ordinary tits though it does not move about in the acrobatic way of the smaller species. The parties are usually six or seven in number, sometimes more, which keep mainly to the lower branches of the trees and recently fallen timber. Food is almost entirely insectivorous, mainly ants, caterpillars and larval stick-insects.

Baker says the call “is a rather shrill note bearing a resemblance to the note of the great tit.” I have not heard it.