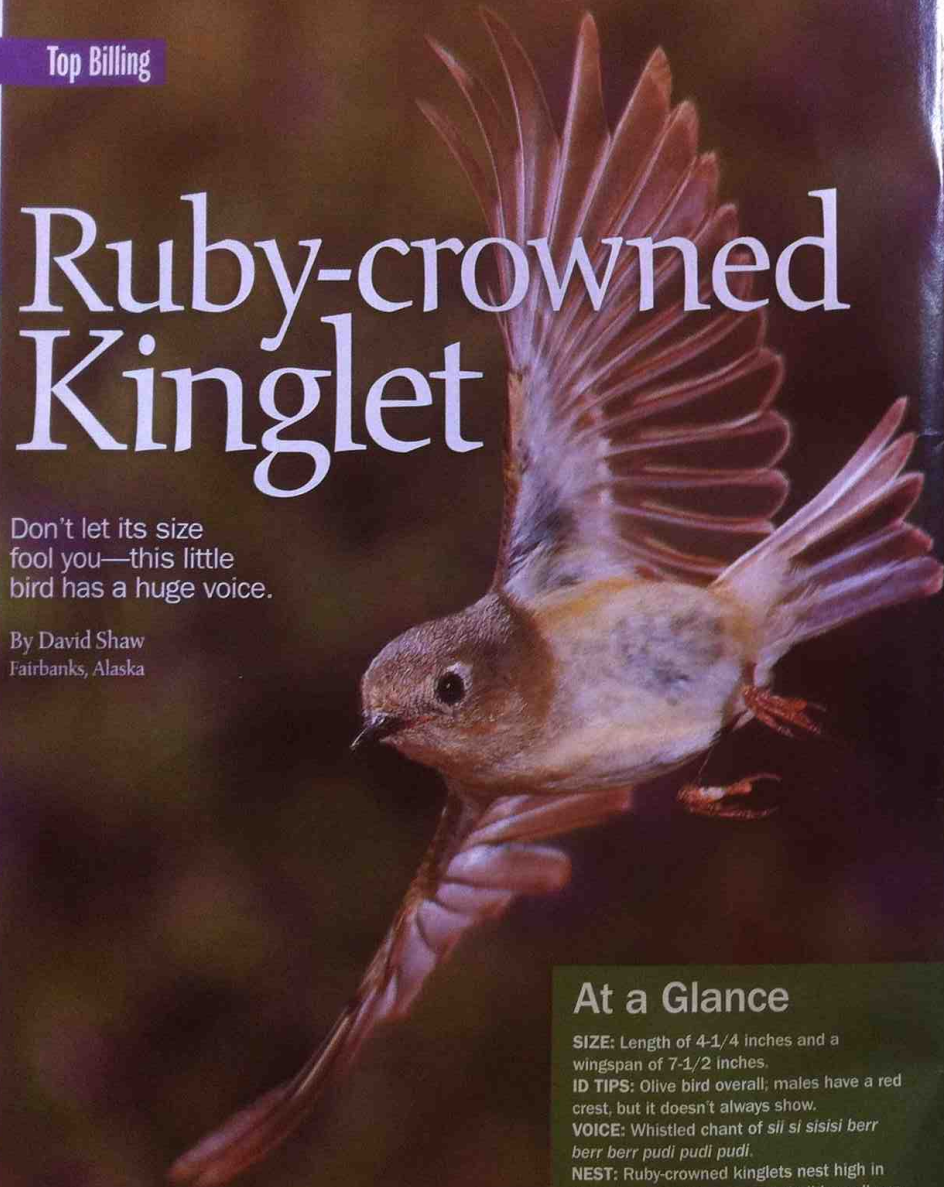


Ruby-crowned Kinglet

Don't let its size fool you—this little bird has a huge voice.

By David Shaw
Fairbanks, Alaska



At a Glance

SIZE: Length of 4-1/4 inches and a wingspan of 7-1/2 inches.
ID TIPS: Olive bird overall; males have a red crest, but it doesn't always show.
VOICE: Whistled chant of *sii si sisisi berr berr berr pudl pudl pudl*.
NEST: Ruby-crowned kinglets nest high in the tops of evergreens. They build small cup nests where the female will lay 5 to 12

In my work as a wildlife biologist, I spend a lot of time outside, standing still in the early light, listening. For a fixed period, I note what birds I hear, then move on to another spot and listen some more.

These "point counts," as they are called, are a method biologists use to detect birds, assess populations and look for changes over time. For me, it is a springtime treat to stand in a quiet forest and listen to the chorus of birdsongs.

In interior Alaska, where I work, there is one species that I can almost always hear. Incredibly loud and boisterous for its diminutive size, you can hear the ruby-crowned kinglet's song from hundreds of yards away.

If I'm close to the singer, a male, usually perched out of sight in the top of a spruce tree, the volume of his song can drown out the rest of the birds in the nearby forest. The noise can even affect my data, but I don't resent his enthusiasm.

Any 7-gram bird that can belt out a song like that has my respect.

Early to Rise

Here in Alaska, the ruby-crowned kinglet is one of the first migrants to arrive each spring. I've always found this early arrival, sometimes when there is still snow on the ground, rather remarkable.

As I mentioned, ruby-crowned kinglets are small—very, very small. They are equipped with thin bills for eating insects and yet arrive on the breeding grounds before most of their prey has emerged for the season.

This past spring, I watched a newly arrived ruby-crowned kinglet high in a white spruce near my home. He was intermittently foraging and letting cry his raucous song. While foraging, he patrolled the branches of the tree, peering underneath scaly pieces of bark and probing into the spruce needles with his fine, thin bill.

Hidden Red Crest

Occasionally, through my binoculars, I could see him raise his bill and swallow a tiny insect. The forest was alive with birdsongs, and I could hear other kinglets singing nearby. Each time another kinglet sang, the

eggs, the most of any North American songbird.

DIET: Insects.

FUN FACTS: Ruby-crowned kinglets are one of the smallest songbirds in North America. Some hummingbirds even weigh more!

BACKYARD FAVORITES: Offer water for the best chance of spotting this beauty in your backyard. To increase your chances, keep a close watch during spring and fall migrations.

Nesting Notes
 Ruby-crowned kinglets lay so many eggs (up to 12 in the Northwest) that their combined weight is often greater than the female herself!
 They build their nests very high in the trees, making them notoriously difficult to study. That's why biologists know very little about their breeding behavior, nests or survival of their chicks.



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 —David Shaw

Hidden Accessory

An otherwise drab, olive-colored bird, the ruby-crowned kinglet is named for the flash of brilliant crimson that graces the crest of the male's head. Don't look too hard, though. You will only see the bird's red crest during courtship or when it's agitated.



bird I was watching raised his red crest, lifted its bill to the air and responded with some notes of his own.

Time to Fly


As the summer breeding season turns to fall, ruby-crowned kinglets begin moving south in droves. They are not choosy when it comes to winter habitat, which can be found everywhere from the forests of the Pacific Northwest to the dry woodlands of Texas and the warm swamps of the Southeast.

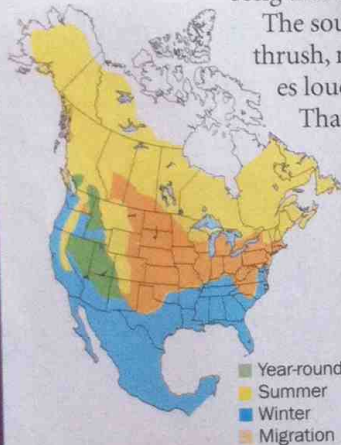
During migration and winter, the species spends a lot of time foraging in mixed-species flocks where they mingle with golden-crowned kinglets, as well as chickadees, warblers and other small birds.

When I lived in western Washington, I regularly encountered this species during my walks through the wet Pacific Coast forests. Quite a few ruby-crowned kinglets spend their winters in the Northwest. Though they do not sing during the winter months, I became accustomed to hearing the high-pitched, airy calls that round out the ruby-crowned's vocal repertoire.

This tiny, tough songbird livens up the forest unlike any other migrant. Though most people enjoy looking for this bird's hard-to-see crest, it is the song that I most associate with the ruby-crowned kinglet.

The sound is not so beautiful as the flutelike hermit thrush, nor as melodic as an American robin, but it rises loud, fast and boisterous, much like spring itself.

That, perhaps, is the reason I love the ruby-crowned. They remind me, with each thunderous note, to stop, watch and listen before the season fades. 

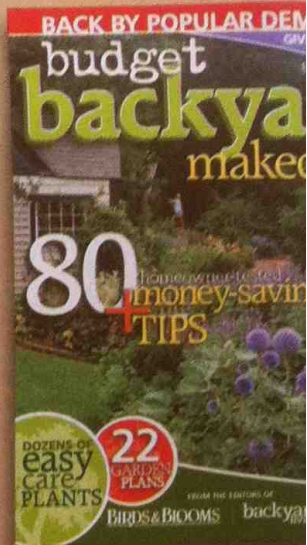


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