

## Goldcrests and Firecrests

These delightful little creatures are the smallest birds in Europe – they are really tiny weighing in at about 6gms and an often-quoted remark is that they weigh the same as a 20p piece! Goldcrests can often be found in gardens in autumn and winter, travelling with tit flocks, though they do not utilise the feeders. However, the usual home of the Goldcrest is a conifer woodland where they bounce about in the high canopy emitting their high pitched calls and even higher-pitched song, which many people, especially those of a certain age, cannot actually hear. They can sometimes be very tame – when feeding low in trees they seem not to notice a human observer close by. On these occasions you can get a close look at their key features – a rounded egg-like shape, greenish plumage, short white wing-bars and a plain face with a big dark eye. What about the “Gold Crest” I hear you say? Well, when the bird tips over forward, as it will do when foraging, you get a chance to see a golden bar bordered by black along the crown. The golden area can be flared dramatically when the bird is agitated but it can also be quite inconspicuous, especially on juvenile birds.



Goldcrests are resident birds with us, but many also migrate here from Scandinavia in the winter. These birds actually fly across the North Sea – a feat which seems impossible for such a tiny scrap of feathers. Early observers therefore decided that Goldcrests must travel on the back of Woodcock, as these two species usually arrive on our shores at the same time!

Firecrests are closely related to Goldcrests. In the UK, Firecrests breed only in large forests in the south of the country, such as the New Forest, so we do not see them in the summer. However a few migrants always come through this area in the autumn. They are typically found in the islands (Skokholm has three as I write this) and we saw one in the willows at the bottom of the Rath Cottage garden a few days ago. Quite often a bird overwinters with us – for several years what was probably the same bird returned to Monkhaven to spend the winter, and last winter I saw one in the Dale Community Garden.



Firecrests are similar to Goldcrests in size and behaviour, though they are less tied to conifers. Their plumage looks quite similar in these pictures but in the flesh they are strikingly different being distinctly more colourful. They have an orange patch on the shoulder which is very distinctive while the black stripe through the eye and large white eyebrow make the face look completely different from a Goldcrest. Keep your eyes open for a Firecrest this winter – there will probably be one somewhere in our local area!

*Rosemary Royle*