

Little rock star of the woods

by Colin Canterbury



A male Golden-crowned Kinglet displays its “mohawk” on Fuller Lakes Trail on the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge (credit: C. Canterbury)

Earlier this month, I took a hike up Fuller Lakes Trail with my dog Scout. The sun was just peaking over the tips of the mountains and a glow formed on the foliage around me. Often when out hiking, I tend to enjoy a slower pace, making my best attempt to observe what all may be around me. This typically involves a lot of stopping and listening, before continuing on. Countless times, I have heard something long before I saw it, if I got the chance to see it at all. This is often the case for those feathered friends of ours that are extremely active this time of year.

Meandering my way up the trail, the chickadees

were sounding off in little squadrons intermixed with both boreal and black-capped species. A Downy Woodpecker was clinging to the side of a dead spruce, pecking and hammering as he made his way up the bole. There was the occasional scramble of a squirrel up a tree, chattering his displeasure at our presence.

As my feet drummed along in a rhythmic fashion, a particular song caught my attention and halted any further progress. It sounded as if there was a high-pitched cricket at the top of a spruce tree. I peered up and got lucky enough to catch a glimpse of it zipping around from branch to branch.

Having yet to get a photo of one this spring, I pulled out my camera in hopes the little fellow might provide me the opportunity. It flew back and forth landing for mere seconds only to vanish, making for a bleak outlook on getting the shot I was after. I watched and waited for a while, but this little Golden-crowned Kinglet (*Regulus satrapa*) had other interests, none of which involved me.

Golden-crowned Kinglets can be found throughout North America. These migrants generally breed in northern coniferous forests and winter across much of the United States. Having the ability to withstand extreme cold allows their breeding and wintering ranges to overlap, with many areas having year-round residents. Such is the case for the population we have here on the Kenai Peninsula.

These stunning little passerines can be seen actively foraging high up in the canopy, hanging or hovering, in front of branches seeking out prey. They are primarily insectivorous, feeding on a wide range of invertebrates, everything from spiders, gnats, small beetles, and the eggs of insects.

When first seeing one, it can be difficult figuring out what type of bird it is, especially if you're looking up and can't see the top portion of the crown. They are very small songbirds with creamy grey on the breast and neck, olive-green from the back to the tail, and small white bars across yellow-shaded wings. One of the most distinguishable features of these birds is the bright yellow patch bordered by a black cap and black stripe around the eye. Males can display a brilliant or-

ange crest down the middle of the yellow crown.

Kinglets are monogamous, but this time of year territories are being established and new pair bonds are setting up nesting sites. Together, the pair builds a cup shaped nest, most often in spruce trees made of bark, lichen, and twigs. The female lays anywhere from 6 to 11 eggs, with incubation lasting two weeks.

The male Kinglet routinely brings the female food for up to five days after the eggs have hatched. The female then joins the male in feeding the young for roughly 18 days, after which time the young leave the nest and the female starts a second clutch. The male remains to tend the fledglings from the first clutch.

When my wife first saw a male singing and flaring his crest, she said, "Look at him up on that branch displaying that beautiful mohawk. He's touring around the nation, singing his heart out, hoping some lucky lady will come by and check him out. He's the little rock star of the woods!" It made me laugh, but I thought what a perfect metaphor to describe the hardy little bird.

So the next time you're out and about, take some time to take in and observe what's around you. There's no telling what you'll discover, but perhaps you'll be fortunate enough to hear or see this "Little rock star of the woods"—the Golden-crowned Kinglet.

Colin Canterbury is a seasonal biological technician at Kenai National Wildlife Refuge. Find more Refuge Notebook articles (1999–present) at https://www.fws.gov/Refuge/Kenai/community/Refuge_notebook.html.