



ANSWERS TO SOME COMMON QUESTIONS

January 2009

Page 1

What does “ruby” mean?

Ruby is a dark, deep red. It is named after a gem that is often this color.

Why do Ruby-crowned Kinglets have ruby crowns?

Because of its bright color, the crown of the Ruby-crowned Kinglet is a good, easy-to-see signal. Kinglets may use this signal, along with singing and posturing, as a warning to other kinglets not to encroach on their territory. Male kinglets may also use the crown to advertise themselves to females. Since they can choose whether or not to expose their crown, kinglets can decide when and when not to use the signal!

What’s “encroach”?

If you invade someone else’s territory, you are encroaching on their space. If you were to spread all your books and notebooks on your classmate’s desk, you’d be encroaching on your classmate’s desk-space!

Why are these birds here in the winter?

Birds in cold climates, such as the temperate climate of much of the United States and Canada, generally breed during the spring and summer. The ice has melted, the days are long, and there is plenty of water and sunshine for plants to grow, produce fruit and seeds, and serve as food for insects. The fruit, seeds and insects also serve as food for birds, which allows the birds to raise chicks. However, in the winter, many trees in temperate climates shed their leaves and stop growing. It is cold, and there aren’t very many insects. Many birds are forced to migrate south to warmer climates to find food. There are birds that breed in the Bay Area that then migrate south to Central or South America. Many Ruby-crowned Kinglets, however, breed much further north. For them, the Bay Area is far south!

Where do they breed?

Ruby-crowned Kinglets breed across much of Alaska and Canada, as well as some far-northern parts of the U.S. Midwest and Northeast. They also breed in the Rocky Mountains, and in mountains on the West Coast, including the Sierra Nevada in California. The birds that winter in the Bay Area, however, probably do not come from the Sierra Nevada. Ruby-crowned Kinglets also winter in the southern United States, and much of Mexico.

What do they eat?

Ruby-crowned Kinglets eat insects. Like many other birds that eat insects, Ruby-crowned Kinglets have thin bills. In contrast, birds that eat seeds, such as sparrows, often have thick, triangular bills, which gives them the power to crack seeds.



January 2009

Page 2

What are “conspecifics”?

Conspecifics are members of the same species. For example, since you are a human being, all human beings are your conspecifics. For a Ruby-crowned Kinglet, its conspecifics are other Ruby-crowned Kinglets.

What does “drab” mean?

Drab is “a dull grayish to yellowish or light olive brown.” When a bird is described as drab, it generally means that the bird is not very colorful! Indeed, Ruby-crowned Kinglets appear not so very colorful, until they decide to expose their bright red crown-patch!

What are the hormonal changes that were mentioned to occur in the spring?

In order to ensure that birds only breed when it is a good idea—in the spring, when there is plenty of food to raise their young—birds carefully control their behavior. Often, some signal from the environment, such as the increasing length of the day in spring, or changes in the weather, will cause a bird to release hormones into its blood stream. Hormones are a type of chemical. When hormones travel around the body of the bird in its blood, they create changes within the brain and other parts of the bird’s body that will prepare the bird for breeding. One of the changes caused in many male birds, including male Ruby-crowned Kinglets, is increased singing. Singing may eventually be used to attract females or defend the boundaries of their breeding territories once they migrate back to their breeding areas. Thus, Ruby-crowned Kinglets may be heard singing more and more as spring approaches.

Do both males and females have the ruby crown?

According to researchers, only male Ruby-crowned Kinglets have a red crown-patch. This is in keeping with a general trend in birds of males being more colorful than females. However, some birdwatchers claim that some red is visible on the head of females!