

Big Personalities Sometimes Come in Small Packages

By Rebecca Bracken

When you think of a bird that is really small, normally a hummingbird comes to mind. But there are a few songbird species that aren't much larger! In fact, with the Giant Hummingbird, a species native to South America, weighing in at 18–24 grams, there are actually a number of songbirds in the US that are considerably smaller.

Two of these tiny songbirds are kinglets, the Golden-crowned Kinglet and the Ruby-crowned Kinglet. Historically, the Golden-crowned Kinglet was found breeding solely in remote, boreal spruce-fir forests, but more recently the species has been expanding its breeding range southward. During winter, Golden-crowned Kinglets reside across most of the US, with some populations staying in Alaska year-round.

Ruby-crowned Kinglets breed even further north, reaching the northernmost portions of the boreal forests in Canada. During the winter, Ruby-crowned Kinglets occur in a narrower range than Golden-crowned Kinglets, choosing to reside in southern US and Mexico. It's thought that Ruby-crowned Kinglets do not tolerate cold temperatures as well as Golden-crowned Kinglets, who can survive in areas where temperatures may fall below -40°C at night.

During the summer months, both species make nests in the shape of little cups high in the trees and lay 8-9 elliptical ovate eggs. Eggs are generally white to cream with brown spots or blotches, and sometimes with a spotty design that forms a wreath around the larger end of the egg. Each egg is only 10–14mm in length. After laying her eggs, the female will incubate them for 12–16 days.

After hatching, nestlings are completely naked except for a few downy feathers on the head. Both parents will bring food back to the nest to feed the nestlings as they grow. Most nestlings leave the nest and fledge 16–19 days after hatching. About two weeks after fledging, young kinglets can find food on their own, though they'll continue to beg their parents for food, and can start making short flights and hovering in midair.

When I lived and worked in Mississippi for a few years, kinglets were everywhere in the areas I worked! I could hear them making their high-pitched call noises and songs from high in the pine trees. It was always so exciting to look up and see them quickly moving from branch to branch. They're also very sassy and have quite large personalities.

Kinglets will pop their crown up when defending the territory, showing off for the ladies, or when they feel threatened. When searching for food, kinglets really don't like to hold still, and are constantly flicking their wings. Most of their diet consists of small arthropods like spiders, mites, beetles, and grasshoppers. I really enjoyed seeing large flocks of these species moving together from tree to tree.

Here in Texas, kinglets are common winter birds and are frequently found in trees near homes and parks. They might even come down to shrubs and flowering plants. Because they don't eat seeds, you won't typically find them at a bird feeder. So, the best way to see these birds in your yard is to have a few tall trees and an insect-friendly yard! If you can't find them near you, journey out to your local state or community park and start scanning the pine trees – I bet you can find them if you just look up!