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# LIVING WITH BIRDS

By
LEN HOWARD

COLLINS
ST JAMES'S PLACE, LONDON

## **PREFACE**

OURTEEN years ago I left London and began living with wild birds flying freely in and out of my small cottage in Sussex. Because the behaviour of the Great Tits was so intelligent and each individual so different in character I became especially interested in studying this species and recording their behaviour in detail. Some of their life histories were given in my first book Birds as Individuals. After I had written this I discovered that one of the Great Tits had a remarkable talent which she developed with keen interest. Much of my time for the three following years was given to watching this bird, whom I had named "Star," and working with her to develop her gift. The results were so astonishing that I decided upon this continuation of bird biographies.

This talented Great Tit was the third mate of a bird called "Baldhead," whose biography up to June 1950 was recorded in Birds as Individuals. A few incidents of their nesting season in that year have to be repeated in the opening chapter of this second book, otherwise the biography of this remarkable bird would be incomplete, but I have told them here from the point of view of Star's behaviour instead of Baldhead's.

All the material in the book is accurately compiled from notes taken at the time of the events. No scientific terms have been used as these would not be understood by many readers. In my former book I stressed the fact that much intelligence and individuality exists among birds. Also I said that their natural behaviour is suppressed at the slightest suspicion of fear. By living with birds I gain their complete trust so that they can reveal the extent of their intelligence and individuality which in this continuation of biographies is still further proved.

LEN HOWARD

#### CHAPTER ONE

# Star, a Great Tit of Genius

#### I. INTRODUCTORY

OR MANY YEARS about forty Great Tits, twenty Blue Tits, Blackbirds, Thrushes and other species have been in and out of my cottage all day, some of the Tits also roosting indoors. The interior of the cottage is arranged to suit them and my life has become more or less regulated by theirs. Great Tits fly around me whatever I am doing so that work needing concentration is better done after dark.

This evening, before beginning to write their biographies I stood at my window, watching the autumn sunset fade into dusk while the last "tchinks" of a Blackbird came from his roost in a tree by the cottage. A Robin, in the dim light, flitted hastily to the bird-bath on the border of his territory, cocked his head saucily towards his rival already roosting in a tree, then he flew back to the inner precincts of his land. A faint "tic, tic," was heard as he sought his roost. All was now quiet in the garden; the Wren was asleep in a coconut-shell hung to the window-frame. Indoors, the Great Tits and Blue Tits turned in their roost-boxes as I drew the curtains and switched on the reading-lamp; they were used to this and soon fell asleep again, but the noise of typing disturbs them; if continued for long they become restless and hammer on their roost-boxes until I stop tapping the keys. How to get a book written under these conditions is one of the many problems of living with birds.

Although completely fearless with me, my birds are often slow to appear before human strangers, but it is curious that on occasions when their immediate appearance was most helpful they have come at once. During the war some Canadian troops, stationed nearby, came swarming across the field behind my garden hedge and started to break through it, until I called out to them to stop. The men waited while their leader came forward and said sharply, "Private property can't be considered. We are practising getting to the village without going on the roads. We must go through your garden and hedges. . . . " He stared at me in a puzzled manner and left his sentence unfinished, for birds were flying down from the trees and perching on me. "That's funny," he said. "I've been in England a long time and never knew English people had their garden birds behave like that. I've been all over England too and never seen this before." When I told him a little about my birds he stared at me all the harder. "Then it's not an English custom? It's your own idea to live with these birds?" I said that it was their idea to live with me and that I had to protect them. "I like to see them tame like that," he said. "If we come tramping through your garden we might frighten these little birds. We'll go another way." As he retreated through the hedge he called out, "I'm lucky to have seen this. I'll be telling them about it back home. Wonder if they'll believe me." A few days later the name-plate, "Bird Cottage," was missing from my gate. At dusk the previous evening I had seen two Canadians stooping over it. Perhaps the cottage name was wanted by one of them as a backing for the bird-tale he had to tell.

The cottage is on a main road at one end of a fairly large village but thick hedges and trees surround the garden, and the gateway is kept overgrown to make it inconspicuous. The name-plate was never replaced, for too many people were coming in to see the birds and this upset them. In spring and summer especially, Bird Cottage must be kept very quiet.

### 2. COURTING AND COMBATS

In the early spring of 1946 a distinguished-looking Great Tit, with a small white star on her crown, appeared in my garden. She and her mate were strangers who had taken a territory in the neighbouring West Garden, but they had secured a nest-box

hung to a tree in my west hedge. My resident Tits kept them from encroaching beyond this so I rarely saw them. Unaware that this Tit with the white star was a bird with an astonishing talent, I unfortunately chose Star, as I called her, for an experiment of moving her nest-box while she was absent, to see whether she knew it elsewhere, as I would not inflict this upon any bird whose confidence in me was absolute. Directly I took down her box she reappeared and hovered over me, crying so distressfully that I hurriedly replaced the nest-box on her chosen tree, leaving her to brood her eggs in peace.

This interference with Star's nest-box made her cautious of close intercourse with me for three years. It was not until the early autumn of 1949, when she was determined to get a bird called Baldhead for a mate, that she lost her shyness, perhaps because she saw that Baldhead had complete confidence in me. This male's biography, up to 1950, was given in my previous book *Birds as Individuals*; a short repetition of some facts in Baldhead's 1950 nesting season is necessary to make Star's biography complete.

Star showed much determination of character from the beginning. All the autumn and winter she persistently followed Baldhead about, entering the room directly after him and watching from a perch nearby while he fed from my hand. If he left the room directly afterwards she ignored the nut I offered her and flew after him, so keen was she to keep him in sight. For some weeks he seemed not to notice her; his mate of the previous season, called Monocle because of a rim round one eye, was still alive. If she had made efforts to keep him probably he would have remained faithful to her, but she never sought his company, so by mid-winter Star had won Baldhead for a mate.

She now put all her energy into helping him regain his old territory and nest-box by my cottage, which he had lost the previous spring to a Great Tit called Inkey, after desperate struggles that had cost him a leg injury and the loss of his head feathers. These had grown during the summer and he was again beautiful in appearance, but he was slightly lame.

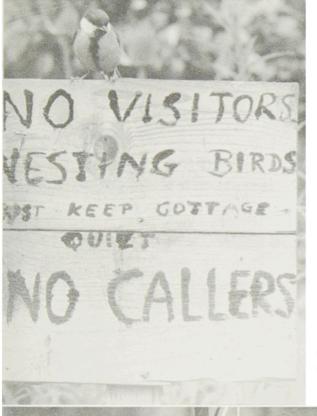
Baldhead had roosted all the autumn and winter in the nest-

box which Inkey had won from him; his victor had made no objection to this, but when territorial disputes began at the end of January 1950, Inkey and his mate Smoke again wanted the nesting-site and box. The previous year Baldhead's mate, Monocle, had left all the fighting to him. While he struggled with Inkey, even after he was injured, she cautiously hid in the bushes and flew away from Smoke, but Star's character was quite different; she was full of life and determination, and when there was something of importance to be done she worked hard until she had achieved it. Fearlessly she took a large share in fighting for the territory and nest-box. Often she came to grips with Smoke and as they rolled together on the ground with feet interlocked, Baldhead hovered over them in agitation, squeaking out high-pitched notes. His lamed leg had resulted from this form of combat. Star and Smoke seemed equally matched in strength, both were vigorous birds, eager for conquest, but Star showed more persistence and after some days her ceaseless efforts wore out Smoke's resistance, she then became nervous of approaching Star and hovered in the background, while Star joined Baldhead in display by the nest-box. Baldhead also worked continuously at displays of various original kinds; he could not come to grips with Inkey because of his weak leg, but his spirit was indomitable. He invented a special form of high-speed attack which he used whenever Inkey perched by the nest-box. Such phenomenal speed was put into these charges, which were accompanied by high-pitched squeak-notes, that Inkey retreated every time.

Baldhead had grown an abnormal spike on the tip of his upper mandible, which made his beak look very long and gave him an impressive appearance. In these charges at Inkey he held his head well forward, thus making his beak conspicuous.

When Star saw Baldhead making these flashy attacks she flew to his side as Inkey retired into the background, then she and Baldhead made a show of examining the nest-box inside and out, with fussy, exaggerated movements, no doubt meant to impress Inkey and Smoke who watched from behind a tree.

By mid-February Baldhead, with Star's constant help, had



No, we can't have visitors! (This board is at the gate of Bird Cottage)

Great Tits on the watch for defaulters. (This board is near the Cottage)





Great Tit in confidential conversation with the author

won back his old territory and nest-box. This year (1950) he had kept all his head feathers intact. Now the battles were over, his previous mate, Monocle, appeared and for a few days made cautious efforts to get near the box. Baldhead took no notice of her. In the heyday of his youth he had been a bigamist and this had ended in tragedy (as related in Birds as Individuals). Bigamy is rare among Great Tits. Star, however, was continually on the watch for Monocle, and when she was seen edging her way slowly through the bushes towards the box, Star quietly approached her and she retreated. One day, instead of retiring, Monocle dodged round the adjacent macrocarpus-tree and tried to get to the nestbox from the other side. Star's manner changed, she grew angry, did many chin-up displays, then flew at Monocle with loud scoldnotes, driving her from my garden and pursuing her beyond West Garden. Monocle did not again attempt to enter Star's territory. She mated with a first year bird who took the adjoining territory. She never went near their boundary and avoided all contact with Star and Baldhead, leaving my room at once if either of them were there. Her mate, called Peetur because he sang what sounded like "pee-tur," many times repeated, was on good terms with Baldhead. They often overlapped their boundaries when feeding.

On 20th February, Star for the first time roosted in the nest-box. It is not usual for Great Tits to sleep together so when Baldhead tried to enter soon afterwards she jumped up and pushed him out. He showed agitation and insisted upon entering. There was a sound of fluttering wings inside the box and he reappeared looking flustered and annoyed. After a turn round their territory he tried again with the same result. He looked cross and made whimpering sounds, hammered at the entrance hole and poked his head inside, but Star again jumped up and pushed him away. From Baldhead's point of view this large box had been his roost since last summer and he preferred it to any other; Star's viewpoint would be that nest-boxes had to be kept clean and having a mate roosting there would mean more work in removing excreta, also it was not the custom for Great Tits to share roosts. But Star gave way in the end, and almost in

starlight, Baldhead entered and all was quiet inside the box. For several evenings the same tussle occurred but Star gave in sooner each day. On 27th February, when she had thrust him out for the seventh time he flitted round their box, uttering loud scold-notes while she jumped up and down inside, trying to catch glimpses of him through the entrance hole without being seen by him. When he again tried to enter she loudly rapped the floor of the box and this drove him away. A few minutes later he made a successful entry. After this Star made no further protests and he slept with her until their young were several days old, when he roosted elsewhere of his own accord.

This domestic disagreement was amusing to watch; possibly Star, too, got some fun from it, but Baldhead found it no joke, judging from his behaviour and expressions!

The abnormal spike on Baldhead's upper mandible had continued to grow and it curved downwards, evidently from pressure put on it when he was trying to pick up food. He now had learnt to turn his head sideways while feeding. When he first brought Star food he had difficulty in handing her his offering because of this projection. She shrank back in fear of contacting the spike and both birds stood facing each other with troubled expressions. After a minute Baldhead had an idea; he went up to her with his head turned sideways and she neatly took the caterpillar from the side of his beak. He must have realised that he could not feed his young in this manner, for two days before they were hatched he began vigorous bill-wiping, working at it for much of the day with difficulty because he had little grip of his perch owing to his weak leg. Sometimes he nearly fell over in his efforts to break off the projection, but he persevered and got rid of his impediment the day that the young were hatched. The theory that birds are conscious only of the present moment cannot be correct; there is much evidence that they make preparations in advance over things that apply only to the individual bird, therefore these cannot be instinctive actions.

Early one morning, five days after Star's fledglings left the nest, she kept rushing to me in an unusually excited manner, to fetch food for the fledglings. Normally she gave them mostly natural food. Baldhead did not appear for an hour, then he flew to me and lay on my lap, unable to stand. His lame leg had been strained again. Star showed much agitation, and began displaying before him, quivering her wings and making nestling-cry sounds. He responded by a faint cry but lay still until she had flown to her young, then he bravely resumed work on one leg, often supporting himself by aid of spread wings while putting food into a fledgling's mouth. After this Star took the main share of feeding the large family, working from morning until night, while Baldhead took intervals of rest. She stimulated him by frequent wing quivering displays. They never left my garden, their brood being kept alternately in the front part or in the orchard at the back of the cottage.

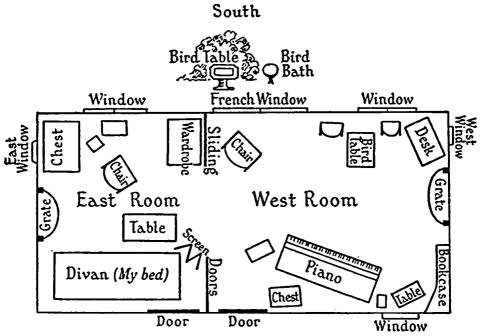
# 3. TALENT IS REVEALED

After this strenuous nesting season was over Star and Baldhead spent restful days sunbathing and preening. The white star on her crown reappeared after her moult, and she again looked trim and elegant. There was always a neatness in her movements which gave her an air of competence, but her outstanding feature was her eyes, which were exceptionally bright.

In September and October, like many of my other Tits, she spent much time over the seasonal pastimes of paper-tearing, hammering at my furniture and ripping the upholstery. Whatever Star set her mind upon she did thoroughly, to the best of her ability, so the holes made by her were larger and deeper than those made by the others, her paper-tearing was done quickly and efficiently and, listening to this demolition squad at work, it was Star's hammering that stood out the loudest. Although admiring her efficiency I had to discourage her from hammering because of the damage she did. Often I chased her to the window, saying "Stop it!" but directly I was not watching, she flew back with renewed zest to continue her occupation.

It was not chance, but through noticing Star's character, that I chose her for the experiment which follows.

By the end of November, all the Tits had given up their hammering and paper-tearing pastime, the days being short and the natural food which they needed—besides what I provided—taking longer to find. Star was not one of my indoor roosters, but she was always the first to enter my room when I drew back the curtains. One morning, the 6th January, the idea struck me of trying her with a counting experiment. When, as usual, she flew to my hand for her nut, instead of giving it to her I held it



M Star's tapping perch on screen frame

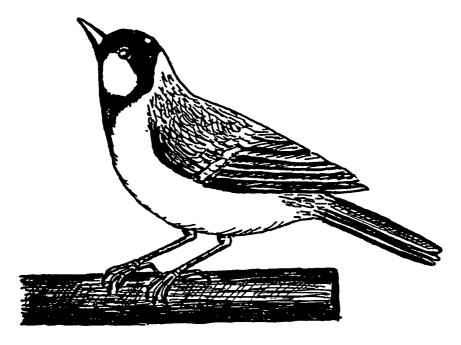
up in my other hand and said, "You must tap for it." Looking at her intently I called in sharp accents, "Tap, Tap." While I spoke her eyes were fixed keenly on mine, then she immediately flew to the top of a wooden screen-frame—a favourite bird perch—and deliberately rapped out two taps on the wood with her beak, copying my speed, she then flew to my hand for the nut. An hour later I tried her again with the same number. She responded correctly in exactly the same manner, flying to my

hand directly afterwards for her nut. She had never been given food for hammering at things, on the contrary, as already related, I had tried to stop her indiscriminate hammerings in the autumn.

The next morning, the suggestion to tap three times was given her. She at once made three resounding raps on the screen. This test was successfully repeated four times during the day. She always copied my rather slow speed. On two occasions I attempted to get her to repeat the series of three taps twice running. This resulted in her leaving the room at once, but after an interval of about an hour she was responsive.

The third day a difficulty arose. Directly she appeared, she flew eagerly to the screen and instantly gave three rhythmic taps, then came to me for her nut. I withheld it because I wanted to try her with four beats. Seeing my hesitation, she angrily turned her back towards me then hastily left the room without the nut. She kept away for an unusually long time, four hours. When she returned, she again flew at once to the screen, instantly rapped out three taps then looked up at me, hoping this time for her reward. I gave it to her, for she thought she had done what was expected of her and I did not want to annoy her again.

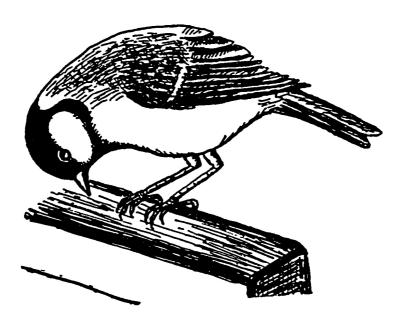
The following morning she perched on the screen, gave me a sidelong glance, then bent her head close to the wood without tapping. I rapped out four beats, using my knuckles on the table instead of giving her the number by calling out "tap" four times. She looked up and stared at me intently but did not tap. Probably the sound made by my knuckles was too muffled, for directly I tapped the table sharply with a pencil she got the four beats correctly. I repeated the same number several times during the day. She never gave a wrong number in response, but sometimes she was not in the mood to tap at all, she then turned her head upwards, to show that she was not interested; I gave her a nut without trying to force her attention as a bird must be humoured to get good results in an experiment of this sort. When she was in the mood for a lesson, she either bowed her head close to the screen or looked at me with a very intent expression. If other birds were in the room she was unable to concentrate,



Star's pose to show me a lesson is not wanted

and it was not often I had her alone for more than two minutes. When others entered just as we were beginning our mathematics I sometimes handed them food quickly to try and get rid of them, withholding Star's nut for the lesson. This made her angry, she gave a short chin-up display, then flew off without the nut or the lesson.

I now wanted to increase the number to five, but she fore-stalled me; for the next few days, 10th to 15th January, she flew to the screen-perch, instantly tapped four, threw me a quick look, tapped 3, 5, 2, glancing at me in between each number. The whole performance was very rapid, the tapping done at a much quicker pace than when she had copied mine, which she must have found laboriously slow, for birds' movements are far quicker than ours, and Time, to birds, goes at a much faster pace. This tapping was done three or four times each day, the sequence varying between 4, 5, 5, 2 and 4, 5, 3, 2, sometimes the 2 being omitted. When I did not give her a nut for this brilliant exhibition



Star's pose when wanting a number

of numbers—hoping she would then listen to 6 taps—she became very cross, swung round on her perch so that her back was turned towards me, then flew down from the screen and in stiffened poses, began a pretence search for food in all the most unlikely places in the rooms, where she had never before looked for food, such as the inside of a bedroom slipper, the top of the wardrobe, the bookcase, the fireplace, giving sharp pokes with her beak here and there but never going to the bird-table in the west room where food is always kept, as she normally would when hungry. This was a kind of annoyance display, aimed at me, for she kept throwing me sidelong glances. She would not come to me when I called her, holding out a nut. Directly other birds entered the room I handed them food and suddenly she flew to me for the nut. Her display had some resemblance to the false-feeding displays in my rooms between rival male Great Tits, when territorial disputes are in progress, but her mock search was much more extensive. Star never went through her tapping

performance except on the screen in the east room, and, so far, it was only done when I stood near it, intending to give her a lesson.

On 16th January she perched on the screen without tapping and looked at me intently. I tapped five, which she copied correctly, then I tried six and she instantly got this. She was now copying my pace again and it was fascinating to watch her intent concentration as she bent her head to the screen, slowly and deliberately, then, at a perfectly even measure, and with firmness, tapped the given numbers.

Later that day I gave her six again. This time she tapped five and then started to fly to my hand for her nut, but, as if realising her mistake, turned back to the screen and gave one loud rap, flying to my hand directly afterwards for her reward. This incident of adding the one to the five was the most interesting evidence so far that she was conscious of the numbers she was tapping. Star had never on any previous occasion given a single tap, nor had this number ever been given her to copy. Twice afterwards during that day she responded correctly to six without this slip. This behaviour over her mistake corresponds with a Jackdaw's behaviour in one of O. Koehler's experiments with caged birds. The Jackdaw given the task to secure five baits went back to its cage after only securing four, but immediately returned and completed its task, then went home to its cage with an air of finality.

The following week lessons were impossible, for territorial chases and displays had begun. When Star came indoors, her mind was centred upon watching for rival Tits to enter the room; directly they appeared she flew at them and chased them away from the cottage. She was worried, for this year Baldhead was making no efforts to win their territory and the coveted nest-box, which the young male called Peetur had used as a roost all the winter. Baldhead was now too lame and physically weakened for the exertions of displays and chases, and Star, by herself, was ceaselessly struggling to keep Peetur and Monocle, his mate of the previous year, from the nest-box, by chases, chin-up displays and scold-notes. Monocle was easily got rid of, but Peetur was

tenacious. It is very unusual for the female to tackle the male over territorial disputes.

So now all Star would do when I began tapping a number was to cut me short by hammering furiously on the screen, only pausing to insert gimlet-action digs into the wood, as if trying to wrench it. Attempts to gain her attention only resulted in her digging into the wood with fiercer twists of her beak so I gave up bothering her and handed her food quickly. She did not as usual wait to eat her nut on my hand, but seized it and hurriedly flew out to her territory.

One wet, windy morning a week later (23rd January) there was a lull in the disputes. She flew to the screen, looked at me, then bowed her head and in a painstaking manner gave three deliberate taps, afterwards looking up at me with her intent expression. I tapped six, she got this correctly but instead of coming to me for her reward, began tapping of her own accord, rapidly, one number after another with slight pauses in between, 5, 4, 6, 7, 5, then she flew to my hand for her nut. After this, for three weeks, territorial affairs took all her attention.

Baldhead still made no effort to gain the territory and several times, when Star saw him perched listlessly indoors she tried to stir him into action by an exact imitation of the original highspeed charge he had invented the previous year for disputes with Inkey. While she rushed towards him, she used his high-pitched squeak-note, but she stopped a foot away from him, stood still, and looked at him keenly. He did not move away from her but attered some feeble notes and fidgeted on his perch. She never used this imitation charge in her disputes with rivals or for any other purpose and I am convinced that her intention was to rouse Baldhead from his torpor and make him use his high-speed charge which had previously been so effective with Inkey. Birds frequently use acting to show other birds what they want done. They sometimes use this miming method of communication when wanting something from me. But Star's performance was an exceptionally interesting and intelligent use of this method of intercourse. For three days she repeated the performance, using it only when Baldhead was idling on his perch with a vacant

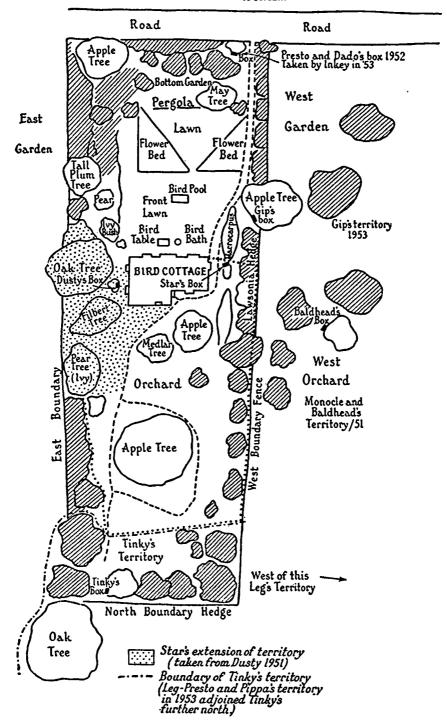
expression in his eyes, unusual to him. Her action may have helped him, for he began to show more liveliness and took interest in the nest-box, making chin-up displays before Peetur, but he continually flew to me for a nut and stayed with me a long time, while Star held on alone with frantic efforts of display, scarcely pausing to eat the food I offered her. It seemed, during these days, that they were holding the site by day but Peetur still slept in the box at night.

On 13th February there was another lull in the disputes. Star perched on the screen and fixed her bright eyes on me with the look that meant she was in a mood for tapping numbers. I gave her 7, and she responded correctly, in her former deliberate manner and at my speed, which to suit her was now much quicker. She accented the first and fifth beats, making the rhythm four and three. Four times during that day and three times on the next, I experimented with different accents in beating 7, but at present she always kept to her own rhythm of 4 and 3, which was the natural one to the human ear as well as to the bird's. Sometimes she tapped much faster than I did. The only time she got the number wrong was when I gave her 7, accenting the second and fifth beats, 1,111,111. She very naturally tapped 6, divided into triplets, 111,111. I had been aware that in giving 7 with an accent on the second beat, I had made the first beat fainter than it should have been. After this, Star tapped of her own accord 6 beats in triplet rhythm. She had before done it in three twos, 11,11,11.

On 15th February I tried Star with 8 beats and each time she did it correctly, dividing the number into 4, 4. Once I gave her the number too slowly and she began tapping before I had finished. I called out to her "No! Wait a minute." She stopped and looked at me. (I talk to my birds in ordinary language and find they often get some understanding of my words by the tone of voice, although in this case it was probably merely hearing my voice that stopped her.) I tapped 8 very fast and she got the number correctly. Twice that day she tapped of her own accord, at a faster pace than she had ever done before, 7, 7, 6, 6, or 7, 7, 6, 6, 7, and it appeared she was trying to work up her speed

to the fastest possible to achieve. She now kept to the rhythm of 3, 3 for 6. This was the last day of the experiment; the development of Star's talent had to wait until the autumn, for her mind became entirely engrossed in nesting affairs.

I had made several attempts to get some of my other Great Tits to tap numbers, both when Star was doing it and when I had them alone on the screen perch. They had not responded and most of them hastily left the screen when I tapped a number, but I determined to try them and their young in the autumn.



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All the remaining photographs, numbers 3, 6, 8b, 9a and b, 15a, 22a, 24a, were taken by me.

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