

Focus on the Marsh Tit

Marsh (and Willow) Tits are regular visitors at feeders in many parts of England & Wales, with up to 7% of gardens reporting them in mid-winter. They are so difficult to tell apart that the records are combined! Most are likely to be the larger, and more common, Marsh Tit.

The two black-capped tits can be mistaken for male Blackcaps but they are really very different. The Blackcap is a graceful warbler and rather bigger than these two tits. The Marsh Tit is bigger than the more familiar Blue Tit and has the shape (but not the size) of a Great Tit. The black head is set off by white cheeks (buffy in typical Willow Tits) and the black does not extend down the back of the neck. The fabled wing panel is helpful for identification but through the winter both species can have pale and faded tips to the feathers (known as coverts) covering the main flight feathers and, by summer, all birds can become bleached and worn.

Quite a few experienced birders are not familiar with the exuberant song of the Marsh Tit or the rather pure whistles of the real song of the Willow Tit. These are not necessarily given frequently if there are not rival pairs in adjacent territories and Willow Tits, in particular, can be silent for long periods. Even where there are several pairs, the territorial boundaries may be established and the pair bonds cemented, so that song is not at all frequent. In my experience March is the best month to listen but song may be heard on crisp frosty days in January through to balmy mornings (generally rather early mornings!) in May. Marsh Tit calls, a sharp 'pit-choo', are very characteristic but the song is a repeated 'chupp, chupp, chupp ...' or something like a Great Tit 'teacha' but shorter and faster. The Willow Tit's whistles are given in regular bursts of three, four or five and are each a descending 'piooo' very like the whistle given by the Wood Warbler at the beginning of its full song.

Finding them is easiest if you know where they have been seen before. These are birds that seriously *stay at home*. In winter they do join mixed flocks of tits when these pass through the home territory but only as long as they are within it — when the tit flock leaves the Marsh or Willow Tit's home range they stay behind. It may be that the small autumn and winter groups of four to seven birds contain the breeding pair, that used the territory for breeding, together with juveniles (possibly paired), which may or may not be related. Beware mixed groups where Marsh and Willow Tits may sometimes forage together!

The habitat chosen may be almost any sort of woodland (although unlikely to be purely conifer stands), scrub, well-

hedged farmland or mature gardens. Many food items are stored, by both species, in the autumn when food is plentiful and they are used later, in the winter, when there are short days and food is less plentiful. One study estimated that one Willow Tit in Murmansk stored 460,000 food items weighing in at 15 kgs! Worried garden owners sometimes see these birds coming in over 100 times an hour and taking a seed to store each time — in many cases, where black sunflower seeds are involved, one can see where they have been stored, and missed, as the plants grow in the spring. **Chris Mead**

Marsh Tit

Fascinating Facts

Marsh and Willow Tit — stay at home birds!

British Marsh and Willow Tits do not move much. Results from ringing reveal just over 10% of recoveries for Marsh Tits involve a movement of more than 10km away from where the bird was ringed. In Willow Tit, less than 25% of the recoveries involve a movement of more than 5km. The storing of food is much more marked in northern populations of Willow Tits than those from further south and this suggests that they can use this food store to enable them to stay so far north in the winter. However, in Fenno-Scandia and the Baltic States there are often large-scale autumn movements of Willow Tits.

Marsh Tits recovering their numbers?

Between the two Breeding Atlases (see Willow Tit) Marsh Tits were lost from 233 (17.1%) of the 10-km squares from which they were reported during the first Atlas. At the same time the Common Birds Census index (a measure of how a species is doing) crashed by 37% (1972–1996). The species was placed on the Amber list of the Birds of Conservation Concern. However, recent news is much better and the Breeding Bird Survey index climbed 45% between 1994 and 2000. This is very good news and in complete contrast with its cousin.

That black cap — glossy or dull?

Willow Tits are said to have a dull black cap, while in Marsh Tits the cap is glossy. Bernard Tucker (one of the founders of the BTO) reasoned that the dull and glossy black on the head of the two species might be due to their physical differences. Bernard looked carefully at birds of different ages and at feathers from different parts of the crown. He used very careful drawings taken direct from microscope images through a *camera lucida* projected image, and found that the minute feather barbules are closer together on the Marsh Tit than on the Willow Tit and they are straighter in, at least, adults. This gives them a shinier look and provides the difference.



Marsh Tit by Tommy Holden