

Focus on the Willow Tit

This little bird is the *Bob the Builder* of the tit world – they excavate their own nests in rotten trunks or branches of alder, willow or birch. They present real problems of identification and were the last widespread native species in England to be recognised by conventional taxonomic techniques.

The birder who thinks there is not an identification problem in separating Marsh from Willow Tits is often one who has not seen many of them. With most species familiarity instils confidence but with Marsh and Willow Tit many people become less and less confident the more they see. There are so many characters given in the books, and passed on by experienced birders, that the situation becomes confused. The only *real* help comes from the calls and they are the best hope you have. These difficulties in identification are the reason why the Willow Tit was the last widespread native species to be recognised by conventional taxonomic techniques. The very first description of a British Willow Tit was published in 1900 from Finchley!

Over most of their range the Willow Tit and the Marsh Tit exist side by side. Neither of them is found in Ireland (it must have been a Blackcap!) and they are absent from most of Scotland. So when a black-capped tit appears in the bush in front of you – which is it? They are perfectly capable of telling you themselves, as there are characteristic calls for each species, given at all times of the year, and their songs are different. However, they are often silent for minutes at a time or, even worse, when they call they will not make the diagnostic sounds you are waiting for. It is particularly irritating when you have caught one of them at a ringing session and demonstrated all the characters to a sceptical trainee only for the bird to fly out of sight without making a sound! If you are lucky the two diagnostic calls you are waiting for are a 'chay, chay, chay' call from the Willow Tit, delivered with the quality of a street-urchin with a latent scouse accent. The call from a Marsh Tit is much more up front and the diagnostic one you are waiting for is a very distinct 'pit-choo' given in a loud and ringing tone and used by both sexes when agitated.

If they are not calling, then the general shape of the bird is a good first indicator. Willow Tits seem to be a bird without a neck, with the head apparently drawn into the shoulders. If the

bird is like a miniature Great Tit then it is a Marsh Tit. There is a clear overlap in size although most British Willow Tits are smaller than British Marsh Tits. Be cautious if you are abroad (or on the east coast in an autumn when either species is on the move) as I have handled Willow Tits with wings longer than any British Marsh Tit! There are parts of Europe where there is no average difference in size between their local birds. See the article on Marsh Tit for plumage differences.

Chris Mead

Willow Tit

Fascinating Facts

Where do I find them?

If you get hold of the New Atlas of Breeding Birds in Britain & Ireland, the density maps show Willow Tits to be particularly common in South Yorkshire and Nottinghamshire (plus some other areas). However, within their range there are also big areas with none — much of Cornwall, Somerset, North Wales, the Fens and vast tracts of the North West. There are some in southern Scotland. Most Willow Tits occupy scrubby areas or marshy ground where the rotten trees they need are common — Alder carr is perfect. However, I have had regular records, through many years, from the top of the Chiltern scarp in chalk grassland scrub – they are no longer there because of changes in their population levels.

Are they in a bad way?

In a word — yes! The 'change map', between the two Breeding Atlases (1968–1972 and 1988–1991), is rather worrying. There were 1,100 squares occupied in the later Atlas and this was down by 9.8% with losses from the northern edges being particularly obvious. Recent work by the BTO has shown a 54% reduction from the Breeding Bird Survey for 1994 to 2000 and, before that, down 50% from 1972 to 1996 from the Common Birds Census. They are currently on the 'Amber' list of Birds of Conservation Concern and may, shortly, go 'Red'.

Will they use my nest box?

Almost only if your name is Jimmy! I say this because Jimmy Maxwell has been very successful with his population right on the northern edge of the range in Lanarkshire. He has developed some rather special nest boxes that are set low, camouflaged with bark and filled with a mixture of shavings and sawdust. The birds *must* excavate their own nests. However do not rely on this fact for identification purposes as Willow Tits may be usurped by Marsh (or other) Tits. Copies of Jimmy's article from *BTO News* 221 are available from the GBW team; please send a SAE.



Willow Tit by Rob Robinson