

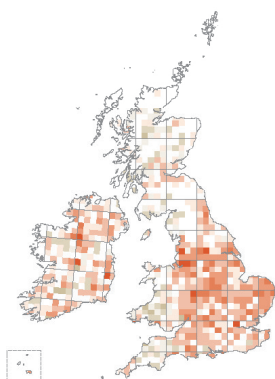
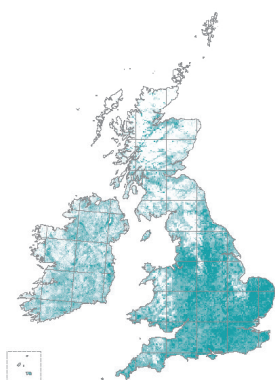
# Long-tailed Tit

## Species focus

by Kate Risely



Long-tailed Tits, by Tommy Holden



▲ Long-tailed Tit winter abundance (top); and breeding abundance change (bottom).

Maps reproduced from *Bird Atlas 2007–11*, a joint project between BTO, BirdWatch Ireland and the Scottish Ornithologists' Club.

**Long-tailed Tits** need no introduction; if your garden is invaded by a throng of extremely cute and chatty ping-pong balls on sticks, you'll know about it! Listen out for their distinctive shrill calls, interspersed with lower-pitched chattering.

This is the best time of year to see Long-tailed Tits in gardens; their normal food of invertebrates runs short and they are tempted to garden bird feeders, normally peanuts. You are very unlikely to see single birds or pairs as in the winter this species always travels around in family groups, consisting of related adults and their young from the previous breeding season. A winter flock of Long-tailed Tits occupies a large but defined territory, which it will defend against other flocks. This flocking behaviour has an important survival function; birds make it through the cold winter nights by roosting huddled together along a branch, since such tiny birds could easily die of exposure if roosting alone. It's been shown that the position in the roosting line is determined by hierarchy, with senior birds in the middle and subordinates at the ends, and that the birds on the ends are less likely to survive a cold winter night. It's no wonder that a single Long-tailed Tit, separated from its flock, will become distressed and agitated, calling constantly until reunited with its fellows.

### EARLY NESTERS

**As spring approaches**, the social dynamic of the flock will start to change. Juvenile females are likely to leave their winter flock and disperse into the territories of neighbouring flocks, where they are more likely to pair up with

males that aren't close relations. Long-tailed Tits don't really sing, but watch out for the males performing display flights at this time of year; you'll see birds flying up vertically with butterfly-like, fluttering flight, then diving down again.

Once pairs have formed the winter flock will start to break up, and you are much less likely to see Long-tailed Tits in your garden as spring progresses. Individual males generally form loose nesting territories within the larger area held by the winter flock, and nest-building starts early, in March or even late February. Of course, it's still cold at this time of year, and flocks are known to reassemble to roost communally even while nest building.

### Juvenile Long-tailed Tit



Juvenile Long-tailed Tit, by John Cranfield

## HELPFUL UNCLES

**One of the** most interesting things about Long-tailed Tit society is the phenomenon of 'helpers at the nest', where extra adults, in addition to the parents, will help to feed and raise the brood. This kind of co-operative breeding is known in various bird species around the world, but is always quite unusual. Long-tailed Tits generally only breed once in a season, and if a nest fails the adults will go and help at another nest. Ringing studies have shown that the helpers are normally siblings of the parent birds; this makes sense as a strategy when you realise that many of the Long-tailed Tits breeding within the territory of one winter flock will be siblings, normally brothers, so if you fail to raise your own offspring it's easy to go next door and help to raise your nieces and nephews! The helpers will bring food to the chicks, which benefits both the young in the nest, as they get more food, and the parent birds, since they don't have to work so hard to provision their young.

Once the broods have fledged the young birds and the helpers will stay together in a flock for the rest of the year, often joining up with their nearby relatives. Watch out for long lines of juvenile Long-tailed Tits huddling together on branches practicing their roosting behaviour!

## MOVEMENTS AND POPULATIONS

**It's clear to** anyone watching a flock of Long-tailed Tits that they are not strong flyers, and in general they are very sedentary, staying in the same area throughout the year. There have only been three instances of ringed birds being found abroad (plus one of a bird ringed abroad being found here), and all of those involved movements between Belgium and the east coast of England. Despite this, they clearly can move when they need to, and there are records of very large-scale, 'irruptive' movements of birds in central and northern Europe. This normally happens in years when a good breeding season has been followed by a hard winter, and a large proportion of the population chooses to relocate elsewhere.

In Britain and Ireland Long-tailed Tits rarely move anywhere, and the breeding and wintering abundance maps from the *Bird Atlas 2007–11* look very similar (the winter abundance map is shown opposite, top). This species is abundant in lowland areas, but clearly less common in landscapes with fewer trees, such as the uplands of Wales and Scotland, and the fenlands around The Wash in East Anglia.

The generally milder winters in recent years are believed to have been behind an observed increase in the population: the red areas on the breeding abundance change map (opposite, bottom) show where abundance has increased since the last breeding atlas. This is supported by figures from the BTO/JNCC/RSPB Breeding Bird Survey, which has measured a 15% increase in the breeding population over the last twenty years.

## FACTBOX: Long-tailed Tit *Aegithalos caudatus*



Long-tailed Tit, by Owen Newman/NPL; Long-tailed Tit egg, by Paul Sterry © (www.naturephotographers.co.uk)

### Population:

Breeding: 330,000 breeding territories

### Conservation status: GREEN-LISTED

### Migration status: Breeding resident

**Diet:** Mostly arthropods, especially bugs, and the eggs and larvae of butterflies and moths

### Longevity:

Typical lifespan: 2 years

Max recorded lifespan (UK): 8 years, 8 months and 5 days

### Breeding Ecology:

Clutch size: 6–8 eggs

Number of broods: 1

Incubation: 15–18 days

Young in nest: 16–17 days

Age at first breeding: 1 year



14mm

[www.bto.org/birdfacts](http://www.bto.org/birdfacts)