

Birdwatch



BTO
Looking out for birds

OCTOBER

Welcome to this month's Bird Watch. I'm one of two Ambassadors for the British Trust for Ornithology's (BTO's) Garden BirdWatch Scheme in South Wales. Each month I introduce you to a bird or other animal that you might see in your garden.

Bird of the Month: Marsh/Willow Tit

Even experienced birdwatchers find it difficult to separate the Marsh and Willow Tit by sight alone. Both have black caps; both are brown on top and are a warm-buff colour below; both have a black bib; and both are roughly the same size (about the same size as a Blue Tit). How, then, can you hope to separate one from the other? Well, the Marsh Tit is the smarter of the two with a glossier black cap, and if you see it feeding on the ground, or pecking at a seed held between its feet, then you can gain a positive identification. Both birds have a black bill but that of the Marsh Tit has a white mark on the upper part. The most accurate distinguishing feature, however, is their call, should you be lucky enough to hear it – the Marsh Tit's is a sneezing 'pit-chou!', whilst the Willow Tit gives a buzzing 'zee-zurzur-zur'. Despite its name, the Marsh Tit prefers drier habitats such as broad-leaved woodland. By contrast the Willow Tit prefers conifers or damper areas. Such are the difficulties in distinguishing these birds that BTO Garden BirdWatchers are asked to record 'Marsh/Willow Tit' as a 'combined' species on their survey forms. However, for the enthusiast, it is still fun to try to tell them apart!

Did you know?

- Eggs containing male Marsh Tits are less likely to hatch than those containing females, although it is not clear why this is the case.



Left, Willow Tit: www.grayimages.co.uk/BTO

Right, Marsh Tit: Jill Pakenham / BTO

- The Willow Tit is a hardy bird which can make a hole in snow to spend the night in!
- Titw'r Helyg is the Welsh name for Willow Tit. Marsh Tit is Titw'r Wern.

How to attract them to your garden:

Marsh Tits will happily take seeds or peanuts (always provide the latter from a mesh feeder). Willow Tits are less likely to visit your garden, but will occasionally take peanuts. Both species naturally eat insects (breeding season) and seeds.

Conservation status: **Red** listed for both species due to a decline in their populations.

My BTO Garden BirdWatch data show that, whilst both species are infrequent visitors, their peak occurrence is between November and January. Between June 2009 and June 2010 neither species were recorded by BTO Garden Birdwatchers in Neath Port Talbot; in Swansea they were recorded by fewer than 5%; whilst in Pembrokeshire they were found in around 8% of gardens taking part in the survey.

Garden BirdWatch Conference! Meet me and find out more about BTO Garden BirdWatch by coming along to the BTO/Wildlife Trust Conference on Sat 22nd October 2011, in Cardiff. For more details please get in touch (see my contact details below).

Happy Garden Bird Watching!

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