

Willow tit

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Status

BoCC Red listed due to a rapid decline since the 1970s.

Population

Approximately 25,000 territories.

Habitat

Well-structured woodland and mature scrub habitats that are, often but not always wet, with a good proportion of standing rotten wood and a well-developed shrub layer within the wood.

Conservation issues

Willow tits have undergone very rapid declines in many areas, particularly in the south and east of England, although there are still relatively strong populations in others. These declines are not fully understood, but a lack of suitable nest sites, inter-specific competition with other tit species both for nest sites and foraging, and the degradation of the shrub layer structure are all potentially contributory.

Ecology

Feeding: invertebrates are the chief prey in the breeding season, and at other times when available. Foraging occurs almost entirely within cover and in the shrub layer, rather than the canopy. Seeds of for

example alder and ash, are taken in autumn and winter and when invertebrates are in short supply.

Other tits, particularly great tits, may force willow tits to feed in the shrub layer. They only rarely visit bird tables, but habitually store seeds from late summer and can depend on them in harsh weather.

Breeding: willow tits excavate their own nestholes, usually in rotten tree trunks or stumps that are sometimes only 7 or 8 cm in diameter. Birch and willow are often used as they rot easily, but not exclusively. Standard nestboxes are avoided but boxes that are set low and filled with woodchips may be (see section on providing nestboxes). The nest is usually made of bark strips, grass and plant down, and lined with animal hair, moss etc.

Between six and nine eggs are laid from mid-April. Larger cavities usually hold larger clutches. The eggs are incubated for 13–15 days, and the chicks take between 17 and 20 days to fledge. They only have one brood

Management issues

The issues are complex and not yet well understood, but a number of factors may contribute to willow tit declines.

Competition from other tit species, for food and for nest sites (blue tits are known to take over newly excavated willow tit nests), could be exacerbated by garden bird feeding, which promotes increased winter survival in those species. Foraging opportunities are reduced where the shrub layer is in poor condition. It can be restored through deer or livestock management, reduction of shade, and amending silvicultural practices to protect the shrub layer.

Suitable nest sites can be lost to silvicultural cleaning, which removes dying and rotting stumps and trunks. Selective in-situ killing of suitable quick rotting trees can provide new nest sites in the relatively short term. Fallen rotting logs have been tied to live trees to replace lost standing deadwood.



Figure 2.20
Breeding
distribution of the
willow tit in
England.