

Willow warbler



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Status

BoCC Amber listed due to a rapid recent decline in southern Britain.

Population

1.5 million pairs/territories.

Habitat

A variety of scrub habitats are occupied, including the shrub layer in open woodland, coppice and woodland edge, and birch woodland is favoured in northern England. Willow warblers often occupy similar, though usually younger and more open habitat to nightingales in the south. The associated ground layer may be important.

Conservation issues

Willow warblers breeding in southern England have declined rapidly in recent years, but there is no good evidence of the causes, although it is hypothesised that

adult survival on migration and wintering grounds may be important.

Habitat structure may be locally significant as there is evidence of a slight downturn in nest productivity. This has been correlated with poor health noted in oaks, which presumably limits associated invertebrate biomass.

Ecology

Feeding: when breeding, willow warblers feed almost entirely on insects and spiders. In the autumn they also take berries. Prey are picked from foliage, twigs and branches, or are taken in flight.

Breeding: nests are located on the ground, and are well-concealed in low vegetation at the base of low shrubs, or in grass tussocks. Nests are domed construction of dry grass, leaves, stems, moss, etc, and lined with fine material.

Most clutches are laid at the end of May or early June. There is usually just one brood, rarely two, of four to eight eggs, and incubation takes 12–14 days. Chicks are usually fledged between 11 and 15 days.

Management issues

The causes of declines in the south need to be better understood. However, poor scrub and shrub layer structure caused by deer browsing affects nesting and feeding habitat quality.

Alleviating heavy shade, especially by ride and woodland edge restructuring will encourage a dense shrub layer. Ride and woodland edge vegetation mowing in the breeding season could take nests on the edges of these habitats.



Figure 2.14
Breeding
distribution of the
willow warbler in
England.