

Willow Tit

Poecile montanus

Category A

Formerly resident, now extinct locally.

Widespread across Europe and Asia at middle and higher latitudes, with a more northern and eastern distribution than Marsh Tit which it replaces in most of Fenno-Scandia and Russia. Sedentary over much of its range, but some northern populations are irruptive with large-scale movements recorded in some years (Snow & Perrins, 1998).

In Kent it was formerly a widespread but thinly distributed resident however, following a steady decline, it became extinct in 2006. There has been just one record in the county since, of a migrant at Sandwich Bay in April 2009 (KOS, 2020).

The Willow Tit was not recognised as a separate species from the Marsh Tit until 1897 and their identification taxed earlier observers. Ticehurst (1909) thought the Willow Tit “somewhat rare” and mentioned only locations in the north and west of the county.

Harrison (1953) also recorded relatively few and suggested that the species was much more selective than the Marsh Tit, preferring damp, old woodland. He considered the population to be most abundant in central and west Kent and the bird absent from the east and southeast of the county.

Taylor *et al* (1981), considered that the results of the first county atlas (undertaken between 1967 and 1973), suggested that the distribution was much the same as in Harrison’s day, though reports were much more numerous, with a concentration in the heavier soils of the Weald and to the east of the Stour Valley. In the main the distribution did bear out the stated preference for damper woods and river valleys. The authors urged caution though when comparing the maps of Marsh and Willow Tits because of the possibility of confusion between the two.

In the first Kent atlas probable or confirmed breeding was recorded locally in TR13 M, which appears to relate to the following records: on the 3rd July 1967 one was recorded from Grove Wood, Saltwood (a locality which can no longer be traced) by T. Grant and on the 1st July 1970 two were seen at an unspecified location near Saltwood by D. E. Chittenden.

D. E. Chittenden also recorded it outside of the breeding season at “Sandling” (presumably within the adjacent tetrad TR13 N), where there were at least 3 on the 23rd November 1971 and one on the 30th January 1973.

The KOS Breeding Atlas for 1988-94 (Henderson & Hodge 1998) showed that the species was present in 173 tetrads in the county which was a slight increase from the 168 populated in the first atlas. However it was concluded that this might actually represent a slight fall in numbers overall over the past 20 years given the improved coverage in the later survey.

This survey found probable or confirmed breeding in TR13 C and possible breeding in TR13 N. The former presumably refers to the area around West Hythe dam, where Peter Wells recalled that it used to be present in the 1980s, whilst Neil Frampton saw one at nearby West Hythe on the 29th September 1981.

Tony Swandale recalled that it was formerly found near Blackhouse Shaw (in TR13 S or TR13 T) but no more is known of that population.

There have been no confirmed records locally after the 1980s, although Roger Norman recorded a possible sighting at West Hythe on the 24th April 1992.

The Willow Tit was noted as “possibly declining” in the county from the early 1990s, with Kent Bird Reports indicating that decreases were becoming apparent at certain sites, for example Ide Hill and Tudeley Woods. The decline appears to have accelerated from the middle part of that decade, with it still being recorded from 27 sites in 1996, decreasing to 12 in 1997, 4 in 2000 and none in 2006. National BBS figures showed a decline of 54% between 1994 and 2000.

Clements *et al* (2015) stated that it had “declined rapidly over the past twenty years, almost completely withdrawing from south-east England” and considered that the most likely reasons for this were “habitat deterioration and the drying-out of woodland”.

It appears that this species was never numerous locally but has now long since disappeared as a resident. It was not recorded in the most recent county atlas but the results are shown in the table below, which shows how this compares to previous atlases. The confirmed and probable breeding categories have been combined to account for differing definitions of these in the first atlas.

Breeding atlases	1967 - 1973		1988 - 1994		2007 – 2013	
Possible	0	(0%)	1	(3%)	0	(0%)
Probable/Confirmed	1	(3%)	1	(3%)	0	(0%)
Total	1	(3%)	2	(6%)	0	(0%)

Ringling recoveries in Kent showed that the species was sedentary in the county, with few coastal reports. In the 25 year period covered by the Birds of Kent, there were just five: three at Dungeness (March, May and October), one at Sandwich Bay (August) and one at the Wicks (October). The Sandwich Bay bird was trapped and thought to be of the race *P. m. rhenanus* from west-central Europe.

There were a further ten coastal records in the county after 1976, with the most recent in 1994. It seems unlikely that this species will occur again locally, even as a migrant.

Figure 1 shows the distribution of records by tetrad.



Figure 1: Distribution of all Willow Tit records at Folkestone and Hythe by tetrad

References

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Ticehurst, N. F. 1909. *A History of the Birds of Kent*. Witherby, London.

Acknowledgements

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