

## Willow Tit

*Poecile montana*

Category A

Formerly resident, now extinct locally

Breeds across middle and higher latitude Europe from Britain and central France eastwards. Has a more northern and eastern distribution than Marsh Tit which it replaces in most of Fenno-Scandia and Russia, and is largely absent from northern Spain, southern and western France and Italy. Sedentary over much of its range, but some northern populations are irruptive with large-scale movements recorded in some years.

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

Harrison in his *The Birds of Kent* (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.

The results of the Kent Ornithological Society Breeding Bird Survey (1967-73) published in the later *Birds of Kent* (1981) 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, but the publication still urged caution when comparing the maps of Marsh and Willow Tits because of the possibility of confusion between the two.

The distribution map given in the *Birds of Kent* shows confirmed breeding locally in the tetrad TR13 M where there were a series of records between 1967 and 1973. On the 3<sup>rd</sup> July 1967 one was recorded from Grove Wood, Saltwood (a locality which can no longer be traced, unless it is the area now known as Bargrove Wood) by T. Grant and on the 1<sup>st</sup> July 1970 two were seen at an unspecified location near Saltwood by D. E. Chittenden. This latter observer also recorded at least 3 at “Sandling” on the 23<sup>rd</sup> November 1971 and one there on the 30<sup>th</sup> January 1973. Peter Wells recalled that Willow Tits used to be present in the West Hythe area, near the dam, and Neil Frampton noted one there on the 29<sup>th</sup> September 1981, but little more is known of this population.

The KOS Breeding Atlas for 1988-94 results showed that the species was present in 173 squares in the county which was a slight increase from the 168 tetrads populated in the 1967-73 survey. However it was concluded that this might suggest a slight fall in numbers overall over the past 20 years given the improved coverage in the later survey.

The Willow Tit was noted as “possibly declining” in the county from the early 1990s, with Kent Bird Reports indicating decreases 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 just 3 in 2002, when the report for that year stated that “this species is now virtually extinct in Kent, being resident in just 3 known localities, with one or two pairs at each site”. National Breeding Bird Survey figures showed a decline of 54% between 1994 and 2000.

The last report from potential breeding habitat in the county was in 2005, and the only record since relates to a migrant at Sandwich Bay in April 2009. Ringing 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. Since then there have been a further ten coastal records in the county – five at Sandwich Bay (April 1980, September 1983, September 1984, November 2001 and April 2009) and singles at Stonelees (September 1980), Foreness (November 1981), St. Margaret’s Bay (October 1983), Reculver (June 1991) and Nagden seawall (June 1994).

It appears that this species was never numerous locally but has now long since disappeared as a resident. The most recent area record relates to one seen by Mark Kennett “near Hougham” from the 17<sup>th</sup> August 1987 to the month’s end, though Roger Norman recorded a possible sighting at West Hythe on the 24<sup>th</sup> April 1992.

The single post-1985 record is shown in figure 1.



Figure 1: Willow Tit records since 1985 at Folkestone and Hythe