

Species Action Plan

Stepping Stones Project

Willow Tit

Last updated: January 2024

Common name: Willow Tit

Scientific name: *Poecile montanus*

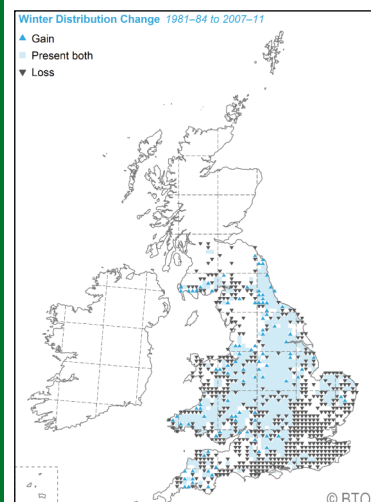
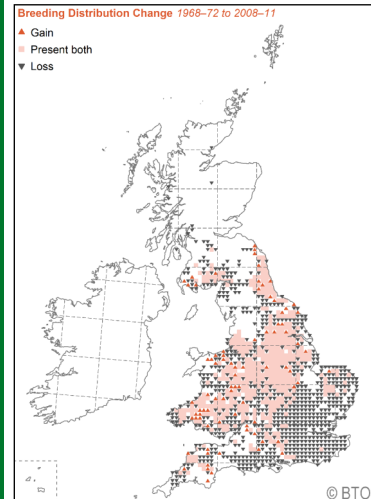
UK conservation status: 'Red'-listed in the Birds of Conservation Concern 4: the Red List for Birds (2021). NERC Section 41 Species of Principal Importance. UKBAP Priority Species.

Ecology: The willow tit is a small, secretive bird which is very difficult to tell apart from marsh tit by sight alone. The distinctive call is the best way to separate these two similar birds, and to confirm presence of this elusive species which can be hard to spot.

Willow tits are sedentary, and have a strong association with damp habitats, especially wet woodland, scrub and early successional habitats, but also occur in deciduous strips within coniferous woodland. They are also associated with river and stream habitats and other linear wetland features where these have damp or young successional woodland and scrub habitats associated with them.

Nesting habitat: Adults excavate their own nest holes in standing rotting deadwood and stumps, especially silver birch, elder, willow and alder. They can nest in stumps as small as 5cm in diameter, though the optimum is thought to be 10-12cm. Willow tit pairs are highly territorial and occupy the same territory all year round once established.

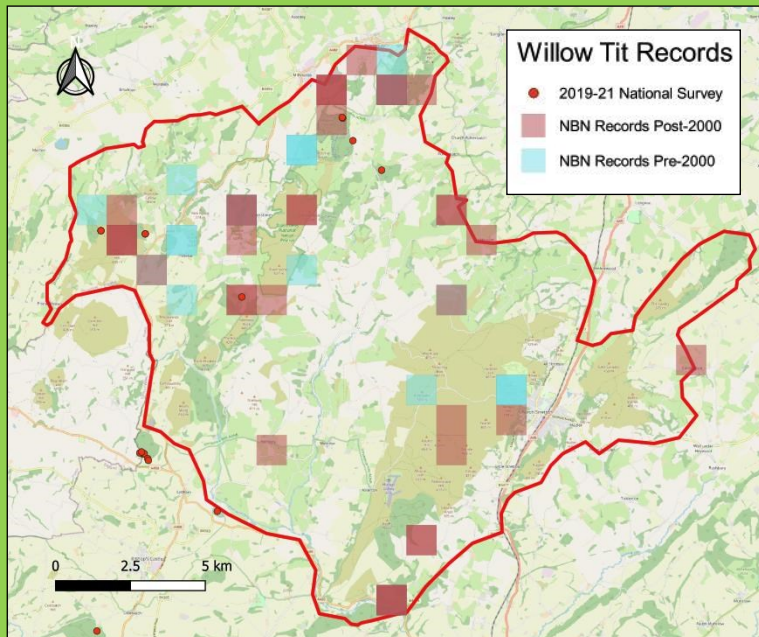
Population trends: Willow tit is the UK's most threatened resident bird, having undergone a substantial decline in abundance and a severe contraction in range since the 1970s. They are now largely absent from many formerly occupied areas. The reasons for this decline are poorly understood, but habitat loss from drainage and clearance of key woodland and scrub habitats, as well as breeding failure due to nest predation or nests being taken over by other species are thought to play a significant role.



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Willow Tit in the Stepping Stones Project Area



Data held by the National Biodiversity Network (NBN) has been analysed to identify 1km records of willow tit within the Stepping Stones Project Area. This data has been split to show records from 2000 onwards (red squares) separately from records before 2000 (blue squares). Darker squares indicate multiple records within that grid square, and may be used as a way of prioritising new survey efforts. Liaison with the BTO 'Species Champion' for this species has suggested that all these records should be treated with caution however, due to the difficulties of separating willow tit from marsh tit in the field by appearance alone.

Confirmed records arising from willow tit surveys incorporated into the National Willow Tit Survey (and using a standardised call-playback methodology) are shown as red dots. These definitive records show a strong bias towards territories in areas of coniferous plantation, such as Eastridge Wood in the north and Riddles Wood near Westcott. Actual territories, however, are likely to be associated with other habitats within the plantations, such as damp woodland, broad-leaved woodland fringes, areas of young tree cover and dense scrub, and further work is needed to categorise known breeding territories using the methodology described in the Willow Tit Conservation Handbook (see below).

This initial work serves as a starting point for conducting further surveys for this elusive species within the Project Area. Identifying and surveying potential sites for this species will be a key output of the

Surveying and Monitoring of Willow Tit

Gathering information on the status and distribution of willow tit in the Project Area is the first step in helping to conserve the species. Where records are identified, landowners can be specifically advised on habitat management for the species, and a picture can start to form of where practical interventions to improve habitat characteristics and link potential sites of value will benefit the species most.

Section 5 of the Willow Tit Conservation Handbook describes in detail a methodology for surveying for the species, based on:

- Initial desktop analysis to identify potential areas for willow tit activity within a site, including analysis of previous records (as detailed in the box above);
- Use of a pre-recorded willow tit call mix, available via the RSPB;
- Determination of presence/likely absence using the playback method and two visits, at least two weeks apart, in the period February–mid-April on fine warm days with little wind;
- Recording of habitat data in all survey locations, whether presence or likely absence is confirmed, using a simple habitat code and scoring system which categorises habitat structure and ranks habitats with a score between 1 and 5.

Box 5.1 Example habitat scoring for willow tit surveys



Increase in sustainability

Willow Tit



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Habitat Management for Willow Tit in the Project Area

Any habitat management work should be preceded by surveys to confirm presence/likely absence of willow tit from a site, using a standard methodology. Once a picture has been developed of local populations, areas for potential habitat enhancement, creation and expansion can be determined.

Habitat enhancement: A dense shrub and understorey layer is a key component of woodlands for willow tit and management may include thinning of larger trees to promote regeneration and prevent canopy closure and shading of the shrub layer, as well as actions to promote scrub and bramble, such as habitat piling. Coppicing of woodlands ensures areas of younger trees are always available and that woodland habitats do not mature into areas unsuitable for the species. Areas of deadwood should be retained and standing deadwood can be created through ringbarking of selected stems. Creation of dense edge habitats along glades and rides is of particular benefit for willow tit in established woodlands. Measures to maintain damp woodland such as blocking outflow drains and 'slowing the flow' are also beneficial.



Habitat creation and expansion: Willow tit rely heavily on habitat connections for dispersal, and have disappeared from open landscapes across much of the country.

Connecting habitats supporting known populations with dense, scrubby hedgerows and creation of scrub margins and damp woodland along existing watercourses should be a priority to allow dispersal of young from breeding sites. Habitat creation areas should be identified that act as 'stepping stones' between larger blocks of suitable habitat.

In mature woodlands and conifer plantations, willow tit are most often associated with transitional edge habitats. Many woodlands in the Project Area end abruptly at the interface between farmland and woodland, and a key area for habitat expansion would be to 'buffer' existing woodlands with a dense shrub and scrub layer of such importance to willow tit, especially where water features are also associated with the woodland edge.

Conservation Objectives for Willow Tit

- Understand more about the population of willow tit in the Stepping Stones Project Area and the habitats that they use, through a standardised programme of species-specific surveys.
- Assess connectivity through the landscape between willow tit sites and develop a Habitat Connectivity Strategy including locations for the creation of new connecting habitats.
- Develop a Habitat Management Plan for willow tit in the Stepping Stones Project Area.
- Understand the relationship between willow and marsh tit in the Project Area and explore the differences and similarities in distribution and habitat.
- Increase the value of existing habitats, expand the area of transitional habitats and create linear corridors and stepping stones through implementation of practical management interventions in the Project Area.
- Increase understanding of willow tit conservation priorities amongst the local community and landowners through a programme of information dissemination, practical management advice and management support.



Conservation Actions for Willow Tit

- Ensure all recent records of willow tit in the Project Area are documented and added to the master data spreadsheet and the GIS mapping layer for the project by March 2024.
- By March 2024, develop a willow tit survey training presentation describing the standard methodology to be used for all subsequent willow tit surveys in the Project Area.
- By March 2024, recruit and train a group of dedicated willow tit volunteer surveyors to conduct annual surveys, following the standard methodology from March 2024 onwards.
- By March 2024, prepare a *SAP Summary Factsheet for Willow Tit* for dissemination to farmers, landowners, wildlife groups and other interested parties, which summarises the species and provides advice for the management of habitats to benefit willow tit.
- Conduct a desk study to map areas of potential habitat within the Project Area and to identify potential new sites for survey, including coniferous and broadleaved woodland, scrub, wooded river and stream habitats, hedgerows, and other wooded corridors.
- Prioritise and rank the above identified areas for survey, together with sites containing previous willow tit records as detailed on Page 2 and the mapping accompanying this SAP. Where necessary, obtain permissions for survey from landowners by March 2024.
- From March 2024, conduct an annual programme of willow tit surveys, to understand more about habitat preferences within the Project Area and to identify sites for habitat enhancement, creation and expansion in the implementation phase of this SAP. This will include resurvey of known sites and surveying newly identified sites identified above.
- Add new records to the spreadsheet and GIS mapping by May of each survey year, liaise with relevant landowners and prioritise areas for practical management interventions.
- Drawing on the results of the annual surveys, liaise with relevant landowners and conduct practical habitat management interventions in support of known populations, aimed at improving, expanding and connecting key habitats and territories within the Project Area.
- At Barns Farm, conduct a habitat suitability assessment for willow tit and install 10 willow tit nest logs by April 2024.
- By end of 2024 commence wet woodland habitat creation at one suitable site in the area.

Willow Tit

About Stepping Stones

Stepping Stones is an innovative landscape-scale conservation programme.

The aim is to connect wildlife habitats by strengthening or creating 'stepping stones' and corridors of habitat between the Long Mynd and Stiperstones, and beyond. In practice, this means creating and linking areas of heathland, flower-rich grasslands and broadleaved woodland by a network of wildlife-rich hedgerows, road verges, hillsides, streamside wetlands and strong riparian corridors.



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