

Willow Tit in Shropshire 2017 update

Greetings fellow Willow tit enthusiasts!

2017 marks the second year of dedicated survey for this elusive and fascinating species. Once again many volunteers have taken part and spent many hours exploring woodlands across Shropshire in search of Willow tit. I cannot thank everyone enough that has participated, some for the second year running. Some people in particular have covered large distances and areas, and have really gone above and beyond and I hope that it will provide some degree of satisfaction to see how much information has been gathered in such a short space of time, and .

Sites surveyed

My tentative target of 20 new sites to have some form of survey done during 2017 was, I'm thrilled to say, surpassed. In fact, we had nearly a half as many again with a grand total of 28 new sites surveyed. Of these 28 sites, 11 provided successful records, and of the failures, several of them held Marsh tit which is a pretty good consolation prize. I even heard a Goshawk in one site!

Even better news was that the geographical coverage was improved. We now have sites all around the County, with records collected from various sites north of Shrewsbury, the NW of the County near Oswestry and also the forests in the SW around the Clee and Catherton areas.

I was also really pleased to receive some quite detailed surveys, where surveyors covered larger sites with many regular playback spots along the route, providing some quite detailed information about preferred areas within these sites. Whixall Moss is a huge site with lots of good habitat around the edges, ranging from young birch woodland to conifer plantation. David Tompkins, the new reserve manager there, organised a team of volunteers to carry out playback surveys all around the perimeter of the site (even into the Welsh side). Interestingly, only the broadleaved woodland on the south side of the moss seemed to hold Willow tit whereas the conifers to the north did not. Interestingly, Marsh tit were also found along the wooded canal on the SW side of the moss.

I also received extensive survey maps from Bucknell Forest and the forest around Clee Hill. They seemed to be quite widespread in Bucknell with perhaps 4 or more territories, but rare in Clee with only 1 encounter.

Of course, Willow tit are far from predictable and even negative results cannot be taken for granted, so repeat surveys of sites that looked to fulfil the requirements (damp areas, high birch content, standing deadwood) are always a good idea.

I am working on a gazetteer of sites to go with a map to better illustrate the spread of sites through the county, and I shall email out a copy of this when finished.

RESULTS FROM FURTHER AFIELD

I have started working for neighbouring Staffordshire Wildlife Trust this year, and so far my initial contacts with local birders indicates that Willow tit are also fairly widespread In Staffs as well, in fact I have heard anecdotally (more than once), that they are more common than Marsh tit (which doesn't seem to be the case in Shropshire). The Trust has several nature reserves along the western side of the county bordering Shropshire, and during my visits and surveys there I actually made a couple of records myself of singing Willow tit and even a family group noisily chattering away to each other post-fledging. I also discovered that there are records from other sites and also received a very good description of a song from a site with some potential. Needless, to say, I know what I will be encouraging as a survey priority next year! There may also be the possibility of some kind of joint project going forward with the two counties.

I also received a record of a pair in the Mortimer Forest across the Herefordshire border from Gareth Thomas. The forest is huge and does stretch into Shropshire, where Gareth has also surveyed and encountered several pairs of Willow tit. So it would seem likely that the wider forest area would be a good place to see them if you're down that way.

Amusingly, Gareth also reported hearing the distinctive 'Tchay' call of the Willow tit several times whilst watching Clint Eastwood in 'Any Which Way But Loose'. Upon Googling this, he found that the Black-capped Chickadee (an American member of the tit family and very similar in appearance to our Willow tit) was the bird responsible!

NEST RECORDING

Once again, I tried to study Willow tit nesting at Haughmond Hill near Shrewsbury in the Spring. Playback surveys and early visits revealed two territories, one very near last year's nest site (the stump of which fell during the winter and the remains of which was not used). This previous territory held a singing male but I was never able to locate the nest (if there was one). In the second territory, observations of the birds quickly revealed a great stump, which they appeared to be excavating. Then activity seemed to dry up and the search was extended. Eventually I was delighted to find not one but two active nests with eggs in the typical standing dead birch stumps that they seem to prefer, and was able to begin the monitoring process as per the BTO Nest Record Scheme.

Both nests eventually hatched and at this point I was somewhat surprised to find that one pair were in fact Marsh tits! There was no doubt, the calls of the birds were unmistakeable! I have to say that this will probably be the only time I was ever actually disappointed to find a Marsh tit nest!

Sadly, this tale came to a sad end when I found both nests had been predated by woodpeckers. The picture shows one of the nest hole enlarged and opened by the predatory bird.

Still despite, this does give some interesting insight into overlap between Willow and Marsh tit. I am quite sure that Willow tit probably excavated both holes and both looked fresh this year, leading me to believe that the Marsh tits had usurped one of them.



WHAT'S NEXT?

So what can 2018 bring for this project?

Firstly, I hope to be able to add a webpage for the project to the Shropshire Ornithological Society website. This page will allow for downloading of project method and recording forms, as well as these annual reports and hopefully some kind of interactive map.

I am hoping to perhaps open some communications with Staffordshire-based birders and see if anyone is interested in carrying out the same kind of surveys at both Wildlife Trust and non-wildlife Trust sites. Perhaps this can morph into a joint Shropshire/Staffordshire project. I know that the RSPB have already done some work around Coombes Valley, so there is data out there.

Of course I shouldn't get ahead of myself, there is still plenty to do in Shropshire. There are bound to be more sites to survey, and repeat surveys are of high value. There are several conifer plantation areas down in the Clun region that seem bound to have them if searched for, and the Wyre Forest also has records but the few bits that have been surveyed as part of this project have just come up with Marsh tit - so where are the good sites for Willow?

I still believe that some sites, in particular those where both Marsh and Willow tit are present, offer some excellent opportunities for research into interactions between the two species. There is also an opportunity to see if the Forestry Commission are willing to engage with studying this species, after all many of the sites in Shropshire actually belong to them. What effects are forestry having on them? Is it a threat or of benefit? There could be some great opportunities for some student projects or maybe even a PhD?

I will be continuing to try and record nests in my local patch. This kind of data is of high value as there is not much of it, and it really helps us to understand more about how they are using a site and how successful they are. If anyone else is interested in doing this, then I would be happy to help and share my experiences so far.

I am always probably going to have more ideas than I can possibly act on, but the one thing that I would like to see continue is the steady turnover of survey data and sightings that everyone has been gathering. Again, if say 20 new sites could be surveyed in 2018, I would be extremely happy. I also happen to think that there is great value in re-surveying some of the bigger sites, I know I will be doing my best to find more nests and territories at Haughmond.

So please do let me know if you would like to join in again and do some surveys in March and April. It would be wonderful to keep this going. Many thanks once again for everyone's efforts and support.