

WILLOW TIT – ADVISORY SHEET

INTRODUCTION

Willow tits (*Poecile montanus*) are the most rapidly declining resident bird in the UK and a Red List species of conservation concern. The British population is unique to the UK which has undergone a 91% decrease in population size since 1967. The species distribution (fig 1), once widespread, continues to contract with large gaps now present in the south and south west of England.



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Fig 1. Willow tit distribution

HABITAT REQUIREMENTS

Both operational and restored quarries have the potential to offer a significant lifeline to this charismatic species. Willow tits have a habitat preference for damp scrub, and damp woodland with a dense scrub layer. Typically they use vegetation of approximately 2-4 metres in height, especially including willow, hawthorn and elder. The species requires rotten standing deadwood such as willow, elder, birch or alder stumps, in which they excavate their own nest holes. Willow tits hold large territories, but their young do not move easily through open landscapes to find new area so connected habitat (including mature hedges and patches of scrub) is critical to this species successful dispersion.

HOW CAN YOUR QUARRY HELP?

Create new woodland and successional scrub:

- ✓ New woodland on damp soils / silt can be very beneficial for willow tits, especially in areas where populations are known to exist.
- ✓ Targeting permanently damp areas, creating new woodland over several years will allow different aged scrub to develop.
- ✓ Where possible locate new woodland between areas of existing wood thereby increasing the permeability of the landscape for willow tits.
- ✓ Allow natural colonisation of woody species where possible
- ✓ Should planting be a requirement, plant a dense mix of suitable species including native willows, birch, alder, elder and hawthorn, which will support abundant invertebrates and provide early nest sites.
- ✓ Pockets of open space can be included within planting schemes, where species including hawthorn, elder and blackthorn can infill over time.
- ✓ Avoid creating woodland / scrub on existing high biodiversity value e.g. unimproved wet grassland.

Manage or restore existing woodland:

- ✓ Enhance scrubby edges to native woodland or conifer plantations by thinning edge trees along rides, tracks or plot edges, to provide more light and encourage scrub to develop.
- ✓ Glades and rides in suitably damp woodland benefit from '3-zone' management: Zone 1 – central grassy area cut annually, Zone 2 – longer vegetation at ride edges cut every 2-3 years, Zone 3 – scrubby edges cut on various length rotations, grading into woodland stand.
- ✓ Appropriate scrub height can be achieved by cutting different sections of vegetation on a long rotation, approximately every 15 years.

- ✓ Where practical, vegetation can be managed on different length rotations on each side of a ride to provide varied structure.
- ✓ Cutting further indentations into the woodland stand (scalping) provides more opportunities for tall scrub to develop.
- ✓ Within woodland stands, suitable 2-4m understorey can be provided by thinning canopy trees to create a minimum 40% canopy gap, to increase light levels and encourage regeneration.
- ✓ Coppice cut on a rotation of 15-25 years to encourage an appropriate structure.
- ✓ Retain standing deadwood.
- ✓ Leave old willow and birch, which provide good nesting sites, and create new opportunities by leaving some stumps of around 1.5 m height during thinning operations.
- ✓ Creating a partial downward cut with a chainsaw into a stump or trunk can accelerate deadwood development.



Manage scrub:

- ✓ Areas of established scrub should be managed on an appropriate rotation to maintain a good proportion of suitable structure i.e. cut different areas in different years to ensure continued presence of vegetation at 2-4m height.
- ✓ Retain standing deadwood and some mature birch trees as future nest sites

KEY MEASURES IN SUMMARY

- ✓ Manage woodland to provide scrub edges and dense understorey, especially at around 2-4m in height.
- ✓ Conserve soil moisture in woodland and scrub, and retain / increase wetness where possible.
- ✓ Ensure availability of standing deadwood e.g. birch stumps and willow, as nesting habitat
- ✓ Create new native wet woodland and successional scrub
- ✓ Manage and maintain scrub as part of a habitat mosaic
- ✓ All hedgerows to mature and maintain these as part of a habitat mosaic



These key measures should ensure appropriate, connected habitat provides key nesting and feeding sites for this charismatic species, and aid the reversal of its dramatic decline.

If you require any further information, please contact Nature After Minerals on 01767 693441 (www.afterminerals.com).

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