



Willow Warbler  
Photo: Michael Finn

# Willow Warbler

**Dick Coombes** and **Olivia Crowe** report on a westward shift in Willow Warbler abundance.

**C**etti's Warbler, Nuthatch, Short-toed Treecreeper, Serin, Zitting Cisticola... these are just some of the species that the pioneering *Climatic Atlas of European Breeding Birds*, published in 2007, predicted will have become regular breeding species in Ireland by the end of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, if not sooner. Indeed, Cetti's Warbler is already turning up in suitable habitat, e.g. in our East Coast Nature Reserve in Newcastle, Co Wicklow, where we hope it will eventually breed.

But we do not have to wait for these species to colonise to see changes here. Already, apparently climate change-driven shifts in range are being exhibited by several of our most common and regularly occurring summer migrants. One species demonstrating these shifts well is **Willow Warbler**.

The Willow Warbler is arguably as good a symbol of summer as the Swallow. Willow Warblers winter throughout Africa south of the Sahara. Spring migration takes them north to fill a vast summer range stretching across the northern regions of Europe and Asia – from the Aran Islands to eastern Siberia.

They begin arriving in Ireland at the start of April and, within days of the first stragglers being seen, Willow Warblers pour into the country in a massive surge, many making first landfall along the south and east coasts.

At migration hotspots such as Great Saltee Island in Co Wexford, as many as 200 typically make a temporary stopover for just one day before pushing on northwards. On

one spring day, a staggering 2,000 were recorded on this small island.

This little olive-green bird with its plain plumage and unobtrusive habits would be overlooked easily but for its charismatic song. Few countryside sounds evoke a sense of summer more eloquently than the song of the Willow Warbler – a whispered series of notes tumbling down the scale, described once as a “silvery cadence,” eventually petering out as if out of breath. The perfect warbler!

The colloquial Irish name, Sally Picker, nicely depicts the bird's dainty feeding action as it plucks insects from the underside of leaves; it also makes the association between the bird and willow trees, sally being a common name for willow in Ireland.

Of course, Willow Warblers are not just found in their namesake tree species – they are at home wherever pioneer-growth trees and bushes flourish. Birch and alder groves are much favoured, especially when associated with water or with damp and heavily vegetated ground. Even young conifer plantations provide suitable nesting habitat for about fifteen years, until they grow too tall and dense.

Our second-most widespread and numerous summer migrant (after Swallow), this small warbler is even more common and widely distributed than Great Tit: it occurs in almost every 10-km square of the national grids across Britain and Ireland.

The Irish population has around 1.7 million territories – that is the estimated number of singing males. They are literally everywhere during the summer months.

## Factfile

### Names

**Common name:** Willow Warbler

**Scientific name:** *Phylloscopus trochilus*

**Irish name:** Ceolaire Sailí

**Local name:** Sally Picker

### Occurrence

Summer migrant wintering in Africa south of the Sahara. It breeds widely across Europe, Russia and Siberia.

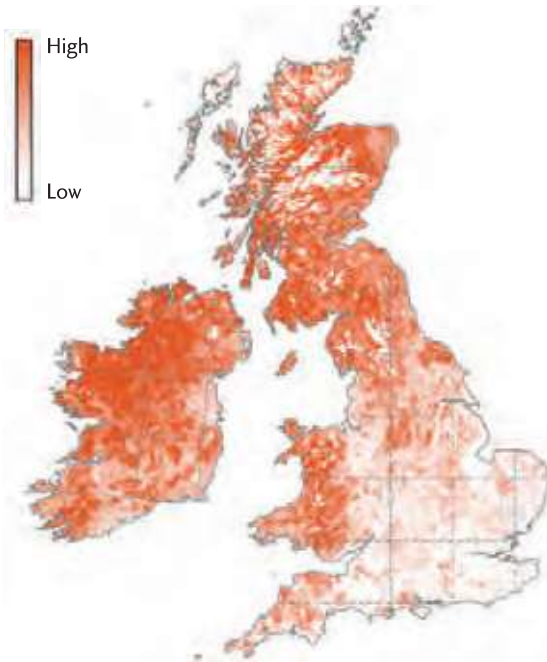
### Confusion species

Very similar-looking to, and a close relative of, the Chiffchaff. Chiffchaffs do not winter as far south and thus have a shorter distance to migrate, typically arriving two weeks earlier in spring.

Separating the two can be tricky. The Willow's paler legs and longer wings are a help, but singing males present no problem as their songs are completely different, the Chiffchaff's being instantly recognisable: “chiff-chaff-chiff-chaff-chiff.”

### Population size and status

Every summer, an estimated 1.7 million territories are established by singing male Willow Warblers in Ireland, and the population is increasing. Across Europe, there are 56-100 million territories, but the overall population is declining.



Willow Warbler relative breeding abundance, 2008-11. Note the higher densities in Ireland and north-west Britain relative to the south-east. **Source:** *Bird Atlas 2007-11*, courtesy of BTO.



Willow Warbler. **Photo:** Carl Morrow

The maps from *Bird Atlas 2007-2011* show that the Willow Warbler's distribution at 10-km level has changed very little in Ireland since the previous two Atlases, 20 and 40 years ago respectively, but their numbers have increased.

Our annual **Countryside Bird Survey** has shown they are doing very well and there has been a significant increase since 2003.

A very different picture is beginning to emerge in England, especially in the south and east, where a serious decline is apparent from both the UK's annual **Breeding Bird Survey** results (from select sites) and the all-encompassing 2007-2011 Bird Atlas.

That the patterns of change in Willow Warbler distribution are not consistent across Britain and Ireland first came to light back in 2010, when a study by Caitriona Morrison from the University of East Anglia demonstrated that the population trends

were following a gradient from sharp declines in the south and east of England to shallow declines or slight increases in parts of the north and west of England, Scotland and Ireland.

### Marked shift in abundance

Later on, the 2007-2011 Bird Atlas maps would illustrate these findings quite well, showing the declines in relative abundance in the southeast (England) contrasting with increases in the northwest (Ireland and Scotland) – in other words, a shift in abundance from the southeast to the northwest.

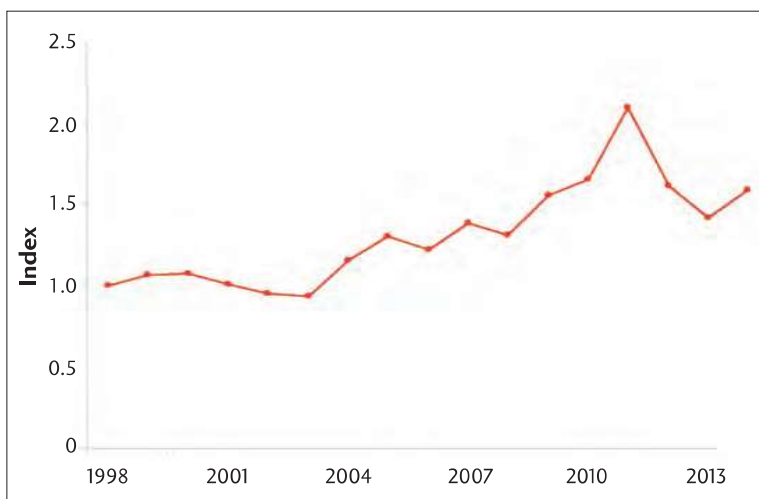
This pattern of change, which is also evident for many other sub-Saharan migrants, has us all a little perplexed. Morrison and her colleagues have suggested that changing climatic conditions and habitat

change are responsible.

The global populations of most of our sub-Saharan migrants, including Willow Warbler, are declining. It is probable that unfavourable conditions on the wintering grounds are driving this overall downward trend.

The research on Willow Warbler suggests that the breeding conditions in Scotland (and perhaps also Ireland) are now perhaps better than in England, and are masking the impacts of the overall population decline across Europe.

The picture is further complicated by evidence that Willow Warblers breeding in northern Britain come from different non-breeding or wintering locations to those breeding in southeastern Britain. There may well be some variation in the resource availability in their wintering areas which is causing the differences in trends.



Willow Warbler has shown a significant increase in abundance over the course of our Countryside Bird Survey (years 1998 to 2014 shown here).



Willow Warbler  
**Photo:** PJ Wall