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Bearded tits thriving in the Tay reedbeds

Last modified: 07 November 2015



Image: **Andy Hay**

Long-term monitoring of one of the country's most charismatic little birds has revealed that the River Tay is possibly their largest stronghold in the UK.

Bearded tits are found only in reedbeds and the historic loss of habitat across Britain has resulted in the population being fragmented and dissipated across isolated areas.

But records from ringing work – where ornithologists fit minute identification bands on the birds' legs to gather monitoring data on their movements and lifespan – has shown that 2014 was a record-breaking year.

In 2014 723 of these charismatic birds were ringed at the Tay reedbeds – more than double the number in 2013.

Data from the BTO also showed that the Tay reedbeds were home to 45 per cent of the bearded tits ringed in Britain last year, highlighting the importance of this site to the country's population.

The ringing work was undertaken by the Tay Ringing Group along with Iain Malzer, whose PhD research is revealing more about the movements of these birds. One day alone 76 bearded tits were ringed, and of the 55 ringing days seven of those included catches of over 60 birds.

Surprisingly, the birds only colonised the reedbeds along the Tay, the largest continuous area of reedbed in Britain, in the early 1990s.

RSPB Scotland manages more than half of the reed bed area, working with local landowners to protect and conserve this important habitat which is also home to species such as sedge warblers, water rails, marsh harriers, and reed buntings. Reedbeds are very fast growing and the cutting and management of them is crucial to creating the best possible habitat for bearded tits and other wildlife.

Heather McCallum, RSPB Scotland reserves ecologist: “The Tay reedbeds are a stronghold for bearded tits in Britain and the work done by the Tay Ringing Group and Iain during the course of his PhD means that we’re able to keep track of how the birds are faring here. This data not only underlines the importance of the Tay reedbeds to the population but also demonstrates how the careful management of this environment has enabled these birds to thrive here.

“Bearded tits are an amber list species and although 2014 was a good year for them at the Tay they are vulnerable to severe winters. Numbers can fluctuate year on year so it’s vital that we continue to manage the reedbeds to maximise the quality of their habitat”

Iain Malzer said: ““The bearded tits on the Tay are reacting positively to RSPB Scotland’s reed management and over the course of the study we’ve learned lots about how these birds interact with their specialist habitat.

“We placed radio-trackers on close to 40 bearded tits over two breeding seasons, allowing us real insight into the habitat selection of these normally elusive birds. We noticed that, while old, dry, patches of reed are critical for nesting, almost all foraging trips occurred in more open, previously managed reed where invertebrates were easier to catch. The key looks to be in creating patches of reed at different ages, offering a variety of resources for the bearded tits to exploit.

“The staggering numbers recorded on the Tay in 2014, which were almost certainly due to a combination of management and favourable breeding conditions, led to the dispersal of many individuals throughout Scotland. Thus, appropriate management at this site could even help encourage these birds to spread and occupy new reedbeds.”

Steve Moyes from the Tay Ringing Group: “It is encouraging that at long last the bearded tits have expanded from the Tay and moved out to other parts of Scotland. I am confident that in the future we will see bearded tits successfully breeding in a number of Scottish reedbeds.”

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