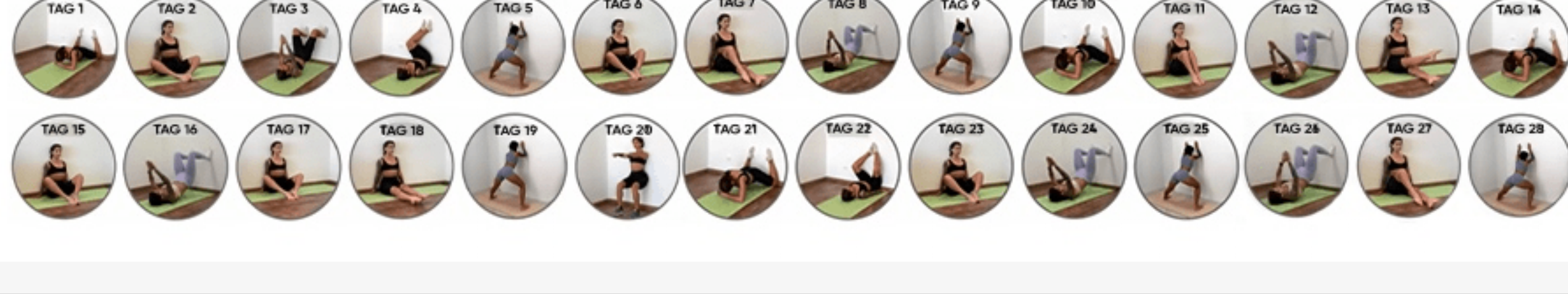


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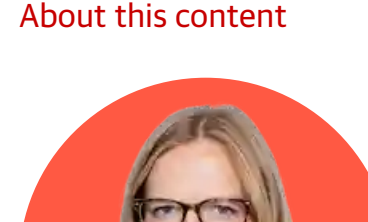


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Soundscapes Birds

“These birds are telling us something serious is happening’: the songbirds disappearing from Britain’s woods

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About this content



Phoebe Weston

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Richard Broughton has been monitoring and recording marsh tits in Monks Wood, Cambridgeshire, for 22 years. Illustration: Guardian Design/Jill Mead

The dramatic decline of marsh tits in an ancient Cambridgeshire woodland is a story repeated across the UK as human activity drives species towards extinction

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Richard Broughton has been nosing around this neighbourhood for 22 years. He gossips about inhabitants past and present, reeling off information about their relationship status, openness to visitors, brawls and neighbourly disputes. “They used to have a big punch up in spring here,” he says, pointing out where one family’s territory ends and the next begins.

Some areas are eerily quiet, with popular old haunts lying uninhabited. “I always get a bit of a pang now, walking through here and it’s empty. It’s like walking down your local high street and seeing your favourite shops are closed and the pub is boarded up.”

Broughton’s domain is not a city block but an ancient woodland called Monks Wood, in Cambridgeshire. The inhabitants are marsh tits: tiny songbirds, each weighing about the same as two sheets of A4 paper.



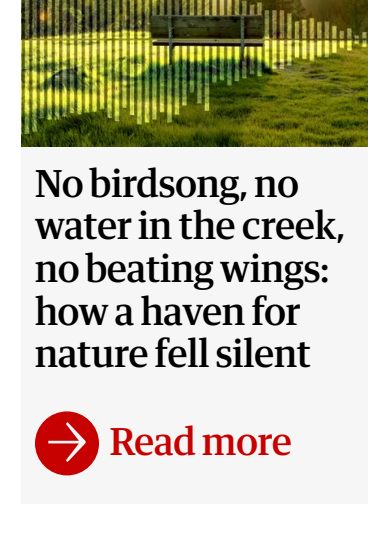
The UK breeding population of the marsh tit has declined by 80% in the past 55 years. Photograph: Waters Wildlife Photography

Broughton holds up an old Nokia phone and plays a warning call. The bird he’s searching for is a kind of avian Hugh Hefner: nine years old in May and currently hitched up with a one-year-old. He quickly comes to inspect Broughton. Marsh tits are plucky and territorial, with a distinctive black cap and Inspector Clouseau-style moustaches – as soon as they hear the alarm call they race to investigate.

Soon, however, the calls of this family network of birds may only exist in the plastic casing of Broughton’s Nokia. More than **70 million birds** have disappeared from the UK’s skies since 1970. The delicate calls of marsh tits – and other songbirds – are becoming harder to find, as populations plummet. The story from this wood is being played out nationally, as human noise gets louder and the sounds of nature vanish.

Broughton, who works at the **UK Centre for Ecology and Hydrology**, is Britain’s leading expert on these woodlands, and this family of marsh tits has been studied in more detail and for longer than any others in the country. The sound Broughton is playing is the noise of a bird he recorded 20 years ago. During that time he has attached coloured bands to the legs of more than 1,600 marsh tits to identify them. Only 1.7% of those birds are still alive.

The project was set up in 2002 to study the then-thriving population, but they started seriously declining 10 years in. When he started the study there were 22 pairs in this wood. Last year there were fewer than 10. The UK breeding population has **declined by 80%** in the last 55 years, so these encounters are increasingly rare.

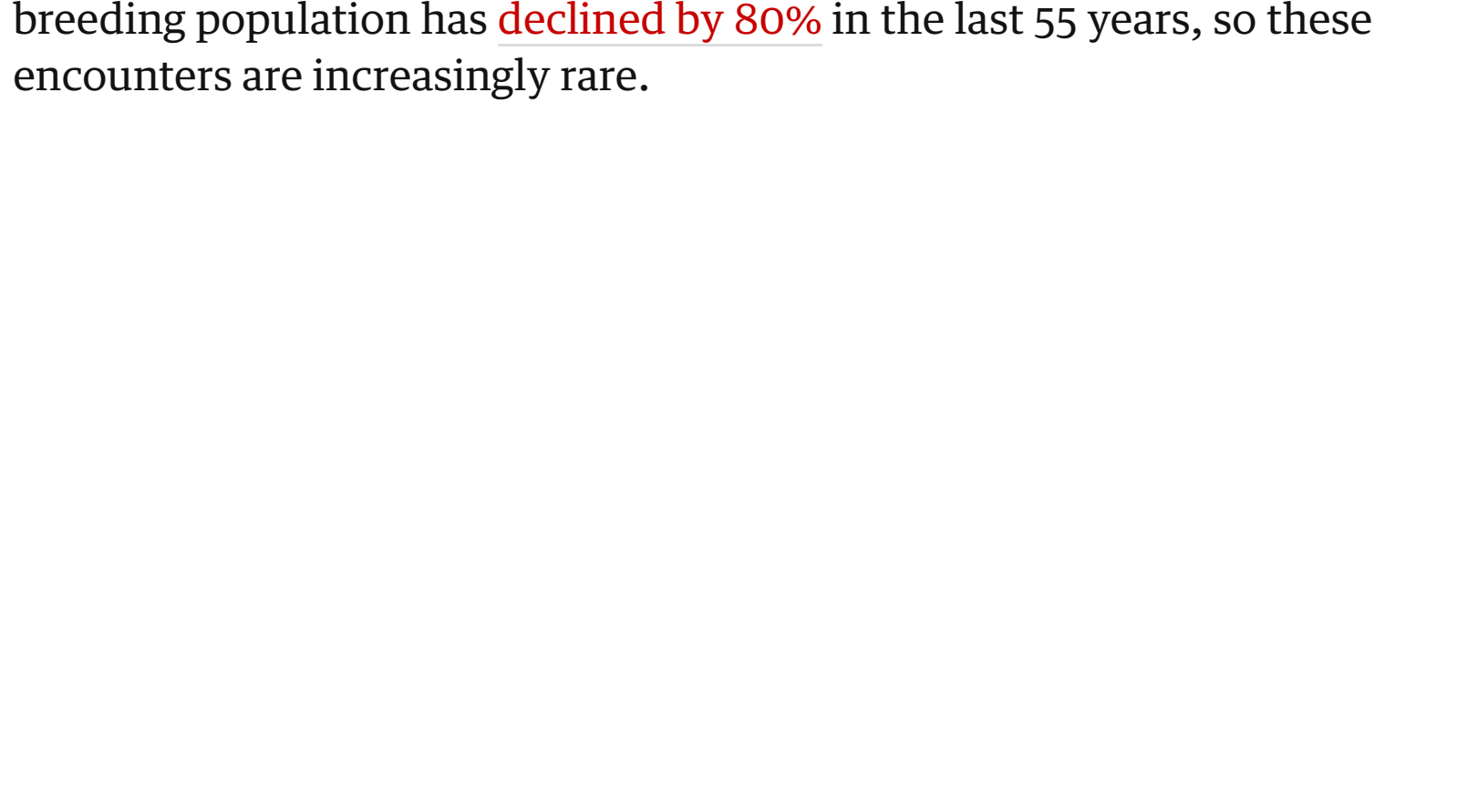


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By 2042 the population is projected to be zero. “We know what’s coming. Within my lifetime they will probably disappear. It can be distressing to watch because you get to know their lives and relationships,” says Broughton.

Marsh tit numbers in Monks Wood have been in rapid decline despite a good turnout this year



Guardian graphic. Source: UK Centre for Ecology & Hydrology. Note: 2024 figure is provisional.

The decline of these birds is a case study in how increasing human activity can drive a species toward extinction. Their dwindling numbers are partly driven by growing competition from blue tits and great tits, which are benefiting from being fed by humans in their gardens (marsh tits wouldn’t venture into people’s gardens for food).

Then there are the declines of insects – a crucial food source. The birds rely on hawthorn-dwelling caterpillars to get in good condition for spring and then feed their freshly hatched young – but climate breakdown now means the hawthorn is coming into leaf long before the birds would normally be nesting. This woodland is a small island of suitable habitat surrounded by intensively farmed arable land. Marsh tits will not fly over open farmland, they only follow hedges and woodlands, so this population is becoming increasingly isolated and incestuous.

When Broughton first came to the wood in 1999 there were nightingales, willow tits, hawfinches and lesser-spotted woodpeckers. “Now they’ve all gone,” he says.

The study is also a microcosm of what’s happening more widely. On average there are **37% fewer woodland birds** in our woods compared with 1970, with declines accelerating in the past five years.

“These birds are telling us that something serious is happening in the woods,” says Broughton. When he first came to the wood in 1999 there were nightingales, willow tits, hawfinches and lesser-spotted woodpeckers – birds that had been here for hundreds or thousands of years. “Now they’ve all gone,” he says. “Marsh tits will probably be next.” The removal of hedges, woodlands and increased numbers of deer are all reducing the size and quality of their habitats.

We spot Hefner 200 metres from where he was first ringed, nearly a decade ago. This five hectares (12 acres) of wood is this old male’s entire universe; he’s probably never left it, and knows it inside-out, right down to every tree and shrub. Over winter he will hide tens of thousands of seeds, a bit like a squirrel. “If they’re not on their territory they’re dead,” says Broughton. In that sense, they’re easy to monitor.

Broughton says he feels the emotional toll of the loss of the marsh tits he’s been observing for more than 20 years

In the neighbouring territory there was a love story with a pair that were together for eight years. They were never apart. Then, one day, she disappeared. “It brought a lump to my throat,” says Broughton. The male appeared bereft, and didn’t pair up with the available females around him. Two months later he died too.

Broughton says he sometimes finds it hard to conduct science and see this happening on our watch. The wood is full of memories of particular birds, families and nests that are now long gone. “There is an emotional toll. I can’t feel neutral about it, I can’t just treat them as datapoints,” he says. “It’s my own ‘silent spring.’”

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