

SEPARATING WILLOW WARBLERS AND CHIFFCHAFFS

There seem to be more enquiries about separating Willow Warbler and Chiffchaff on the Dorset Bird Club Facebook site than any other species group. I thought I'd illustrate the differences with a number of photos of birds taken in the hand.

These two species are in the genus *Phylloscopus* (literally leaf-seeker), the third largest genus in the world with 80 species (mainly in Asia and the Papuan/Melanesian area). Only three species regularly breed in the UK, the other is the now scarce Wood Warbler, which is larger with a startlingly white belly and lemon-yellow breast. Away from breeding areas it is seldom found on migration. Another 14 species in the genus have occurred in the UK varying from the scarce but regular Yellow-browed Warbler to some that have only occurred once.

Willow Warblers arrive in the UK from sub-Saharan Africa in April and breed mainly in N England and Scotland. A few breed in the south but far less than used to. Chiffchaffs arrive from March onwards, mainly from southern Europe and north Africa. However a few do overwinter, it's likely that they migrate from elsewhere to winter here rather than are local breeding birds that stay put. Willows start to reappear on south-bound migration in late July and have largely gone by the end of the 1st week in September. Chiffchaffs are common breeders in the south and with the wintering population, can be seen all year. The bulk of autumn migration occurs from mid-September to mid-October when they can be abundant. Unlike Willows which will have completed the post-juvenile (P-J) moult before migration, juvenile Chiffchaffs are a common sight in July and August. They too will complete their P-J moult before migration in Sept-Oct.

The songs of the two species are obviously different but the calls are similar. Willow has a more disyllabic 'hoeet' than Chiffchaff. Try listening to songs and calls on xeno-canto: <https://www.xeno-canto.org/species/Phylloscopus-trochilus> and <https://www.xeno-canto.org/species/Phylloscopus-collybita>.

Chiffchaffs are smaller on average than Willows with a more rounded crown, shorter and less well defined supercilium, browner flanks, black legs (as opposed to the pale to dark, but seldom black, legs of Willow) and habitually flick their wings AND tail. Willows, especially 1st years, are mainly yellow below (whiter in adults), have cleaner flanks, a more pointed head, slightly longer bill and better defined and longer supercilium.

One key difference is that Willows have a longer primary projection than Chiffchaffs, ie the exposed primaries extend further beyond the tertials on the closed wing, there is some overlap but usually this is obvious on a photo or in the field if the bird will sit still for long enough. Also the wing of a Chiffchaff is more rounded than a Willow, these two features are adaptations to the longer migratory flight that Willows make - ie Willows sacrifice the manoeuvrability that short wings give to increase their ability to make long flights without stopping.



1st year Chiffchaff (above) and Willow Warbler (below) in September

Many 1st year Willows look attenuated, clean and yellow. Note the long primary projection.



Post-juvenile 1st year Willow Warbler in August

However the orange colour on the face of this Willow is probably due to staining, possibly by pollen.



Post-juvenile 1st year Willow Warbler in August

Adults Willows in autumn tend to be whiter below, with darker, more contrasting flight feathers. 1st years of both species do not moult flight feathers (only body feathers) before migration, but adults of both undergo a complete moult of flight and body feathers before heading south. Bizarrely Willows undergo a second complete moult in Africa – they are the only UK passerine to do this. As a result they often look less worn and tidier in spring on arrival in the UK than Chiffs.



Adult Willow Warbler in August

The tidier appearance in spring is amplified by the fact that some Chiffs feed up on nectar in Spain or N Africa before migrating and get a sticky residue above the bill.



Adult Chiffchaff in spring with pollen residue around the bill

A few Willows in autumn have a slight greyish tone, these might, and I emphasise might, be of the race *acredula* from Scandinavia, but as far as I know proof is lacking.



1st year Willow Warbler in August suggestive of race *acredula*

As I said above Chiffs usually only undergo a partial post-juvenile moult but they sometime moult the central tail feathers. The bird below has lost two tail feathers on one side and three on the other (this much loss is most likely due to attempted predation). Note the darker colour (ie strength) of the re-growing feathers. Also the general scruffiness of the mantle is due to the ongoing replacement of the soft juvenile body feathers in the post-juvenile moult. The short primary projection is obvious in this photo.



Juvenile Chiffchaff undergoing partial post-juvenile moult in August

Wintering Chiffchaffs sometimes sing on warm winter days. They prefer sheltered locations near water like sewage treatment works and heavily vegetated ditches. Occasionally a grey/brown Chiffchaff with a call like the 'cheep' call of a chick of a domestic fowl is found in winter. These are of the race *tristis* from Siberia which may be distinct enough to be treated as a full species in the future – Siberian Chiffchaff. Birds that look like this but refuse to call are probably best considered 'eastern Chiffs'.



Chiffchaff of race *tristis* in October

I hope this article is of use. *Phylloscopus* warblers are one of the most challenging groups to identify. Complete familiarity with Willow Warbler and Chiffchaff is required before other members of the genus can be safely identified.

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