



Lesser spotted woodpecker

Dendrocopos minor

Status

Non-SPEC

National monitoring

None.

Population and distribution

This is the least common of the three British woodpeckers. Absent from Ireland, it is most common in the south and east of England but sparsely distributed over most of its range and rarely breeds north of Cumbria (88–91 *Atlas*). Numbers rose in the 1970s and fell back again to their former level in the 1980s. Much of this change has been attributed to the presence of elm trees, dead and dying from Dutch elm disease which temporarily increased the birds' food supply (88–91 *Atlas*). BTO CBC figures (Crick et al 1997) show a population continuing to fall, adding to the general cause for concern that surrounds this species. The estimated population of breeding lesser spotted woodpeckers in Britain is 3,000–6,000 pairs (*Population Estimates*).

Ecology

Nesting takes place almost exclusively in broadleaved woodland habitats, in a variety of situations: along wood edges, in orchards, shelterbelts, thick hedges and parkland dotted with established trees. Lesser spotted woodpeckers nest comparatively more frequently in suburban areas than do great spotted or green woodpeckers (Glue and Boswell 1994). They give a quieter, higher-pitched and more brittle-sounding **drum** (male only) than great spotted woodpecker. They also use an advertising call which is perhaps the most frequent and prominent call: a series of relatively long units with a soft squeaking quality, like 'pee-pee . . .'. A clutch of 4–6 eggs is laid in May–June; incubation is 11–12 days. Young are cared for and fed by both parents and the fledging period is 18–20 days (*BWP*).

Breeding season survey – population

This species is more sparsely distributed and more difficult to locate than great spotted woodpecker, and would be under-represented by the point-count survey method which is recommended for that species (Bealey and Sutherland 1982). The method given here is based on that described by Wiktander et al (1992); it is a more intensive method and may be difficult to achieve in large blocks of woodland. An alternative approach would be to survey the area using a standard CBC (see the generic survey methods section), although this would mean more visits, many of them not at the optimum time of year for this species.

Information required

- maximum number of pairs recorded on any one visit
- a map of the survey area with the boundary clearly marked.

Number and timing of visits

At least three visits, in April.

Time of day

From one hour after dawn to midday.

Weather constraints

Poor weather should be avoided, especially high winds (greater than Beaufort force 4) and heavy rain.

Sites/areas to visit

Any area containing broadleaved trees, including small field copses, open woodland, parkland with plenty of rotting timber, old orchards, shrubberies, gardens, avenues of ancient trees, trees alongside streams, hedgerows with mature trees, golf courses, and gravel pits and reservoirs with scrubby margins.

Equipment

- map of the survey area
- compass (optional).

Safety reminders

Nothing specific. See the *Introduction* for general guidelines.

Disturbance

Disturbance is unlikely using this method, as observation is done from the ground and does not involve any visits to nests.

Methods

Mark the boundary of the survey area on the map. Work out a route which enables you to walk to within 50 m of each point in the survey area, even though this means that you will only be able to cover 0.5 km² in a single day. Obviously, a coordinated team of people could cover a larger area.

Walk through the area at a comfortable pace as quietly as possible, paying particular attention to bird movement in the tree canopy, and checking any movement observed using binoculars. At intervals of no more than 50 paces, stop to scan the trees around you to look for birds foraging on the branches and foliage of trees and scrub or catching insects in the air. If disturbed, lesser spotted woodpeckers will typically hide under or behind a branch, mostly high in a tree. Birds recorded drumming in April will be establishing a territory. Nest excavation can be a noisy and busy affair during April and is often accompanied by courtship and display.

Disputes involving more than two birds (usually males) are quite conspicuous with much display and movement. These occur mainly in April with birds chasing one another in the air. Between chases, these birds may pause together on a branch so you cannot always assume that two (unsexed) birds together are the members of a pair.

On each visit, use a different field map with the route marked on it, although you should alternate the direction of the route on each visit. Mark any woodpecker registrations on the map, cross-referencing these to a notebook allowing more room for comments.

Report the maximum number of pairs counted on any one visit to the area. Pair(s) are defined as follows:

Single birds (males or females) = one pair.

Two (or more) birds of the same sex together = two (or more) pairs.

A male and female together = one pair.

The following records, for example, would all constitute two pairs: two males together; two females together; two males and one female; two females and one male; two males and two females.

References

- Bealey, C E and Sutherland, M P (1982) Woodland birds of the West Sussex Weald. *Sussex Bird Report* 35: 69–73.
- Crick, H Q P, Baillie, S R, Balmer, D E, Bashford, R I, Dudley, C, Glue, D E, Gregory, R D, Marchant, J H, Peach, W J and Wilson, A M (1997) *Breeding Birds in the Wider Countryside: their conservation status (1971–95)*. BTO Research Report 187.
- Glue, D E and Boswell, T (1994) The comparative nesting ecology of the three British breeding woodpeckers. *British Birds* 87: 253–269.
- Wiktander, U, Nilsson, I N, Nilsson, S G, Olsson, O, Pettersson, B and Stagen, A (1992) Occurrence of the lesser spotted woodpecker *Dendrocopos minor* in relation to area of deciduous forest. *Ornis Fennica* 69: 113–118.