

## Lesser Spotted Woodpeckers in 2021

### Woodpecker Network Report \*\*

We are pleased to report that 19 Lesser Spotted Woodpecker nests were monitored and reported to us in 2021. This brings the total monitored by the Woodpecker Network since 2015 to 95. A great achievement for all involved given that only one or two nests a year were being reported before we set up the network. Thanks to everyone who helped us.

Huge thanks to all of you who found and monitored nests this year and to those who searched in vain. We highlight some of your experiences and data later in this report. One volunteer even managed to monitor Lesser Spots whilst running a COVID vaccination centre. For understandable reasons exact nest site details and names of some volunteers are withheld.

We have now monitored nests in 21 counties distributed through the English and Welsh range of the species. Most records are from Hampshire largely the result of good numbers of birds in the New Forest, dedicated surveys and a team of fieldworkers there.

Covid restrictions were much less severe in 2021 which meant that observers could get out into the field early in the season to locate their pairs. Unfortunately, the weather intervened making the pairs slow to settle on their nest site and many early cavity excavations came to nothing. This was very frustrating for the observers given the challenge of finding excavating birds in the first place. Some examples are highlighted in our report.

There was a cold spell of weather in early February but things warmed through March. However cold weather returned in early April and it was well into May before things warmed up again. This led to a late and disrupted nesting season for most birds including the Lesser Spots.

This early cold weather meant that there were many cases of apparently complete and newly excavated nesting cavities being abandoned. We think in most cases the birds made a new cavity. As far as we could tell these were not cases of takeovers by other species, rather the Lesser Spots made a new cavity and delayed their nesting. Mat Shore monitored his birds in Norfolk very closely and in one case the pair excavated at least two cavities before settling on a third one where they eventually bred (see Mat's nest diary below).

We also had many examples of birds making a good cavity which was not used with the birds presumably moving to another nearby nest site, see photo A.

\*\*Report compiled by Ken and Linda Smith, 20/12/2021  
website [www.woodpecker-network.org.uk](http://www.woodpecker-network.org.uk)

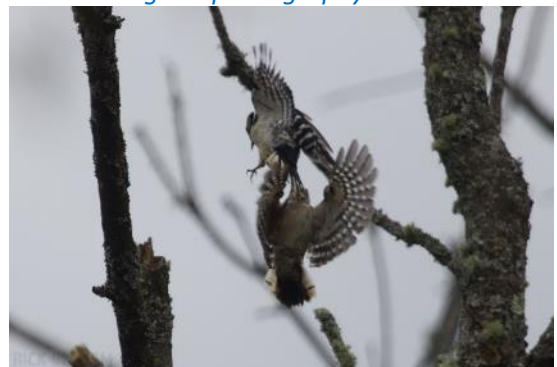


*Male Lesser Spot, Devon 15 April, photos: Rick Ingham*



**Spring highlight: Rick Ingham 15 April 2021:**

*"I have always dreamed about snapping Lesser Spotted Woodpeckers in the sun... such a privilege this morning to sit in a wood on Dartmoor on my own as the sun rose watching two males and three females all scrapping for territory. Beyond words!"*  
[www.rickinghamphotography.co.uk](http://www.rickinghamphotography.co.uk)



*Two female Lesser Spots disputing Photo Rick Ingham*



*A, Lesser Spot nest cavity lined with chippings in a dead Alder, one of two found by Gerald Hinchon and checked on 6<sup>th</sup> & 18<sup>th</sup> May, they were only 50 metres apart – neither were used. Photo Ken & Linda Smith*

All this activity meant that overall, there were more late nests than normal this year. Although some pairs managed to lay their first eggs around the normal date of 25th April there were many around 5-10 May. It is difficult to be certain, but we think an unusually high number of nests failed at the egg stage this year. We recorded three failures during incubation which is unusual.

One of these failed nests was opened up by a Great Spotted Woodpecker but for the other two the behaviour of the birds showed they were incubating eggs and activity ceased before the eggs could have hatched. It is possible that these early failing birds made another nesting attempt but we cannot be sure.

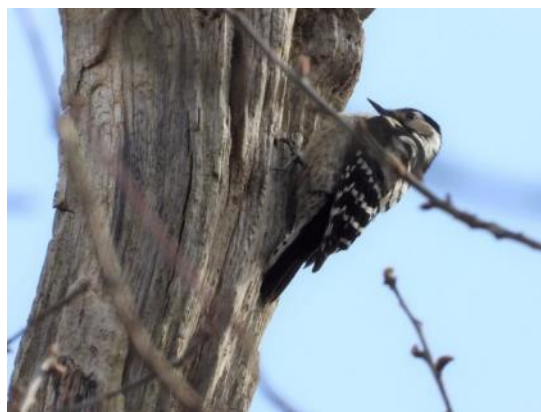
As usual the nest success during chick rearing was good with only one observed failure (attributed to GSW) but the average number of surviving chicks in successful nests was only 2.3. Assuming the birds that failed during incubation did not relay this gives an overall average of 1.6 young per nest. This is the second lowest output we have recorded since our study started in 2015.

With this low level of productivity, the prospects for the species remain poor. Without good data on the survival of British adults and young it is difficult to be precise but a figure of at least 2.0 to 2.5 young per nest to arrest the decline seems reasonable. Studies in Sweden and Germany gave similar figures for adult annual survival of around 60% but survival and recruitment of young is much more difficult to measure and is likely to be highly dependent on the landscape context.

Before 1980 the average number of young fledged per nest was 3.3. Since 2000 studies by Woodpecker Network volunteers and others recorded an average of only 2.5 chicks fledged per nest (Smith and Smith 2020 Bird Study).

Our results have already shown that Lesser Spots suffer from brood reduction, often immediately after hatching. At one of Mat Shore's sites the Lesser Spot nest had two chicks whilst the Great Spot nest only 40 metres away had six young. Availability of food is critical. Again, this year observers recorded detailed notes on the timing, quantity and variety of food items brought to the nest to feed the young. We can also use photographs to analyse the prey species. Aphids are important particularly later in the season when the caterpillars are over, as well as snails and spiders, see some of the photos on the right. Thanks to everyone who has submitted information so far, we hope to pursue this more in coming years.

Some of the highlights from 2021 nests feature in the following pages. All the sightings and records of nests monitored give important data to understand these enigmatic birds and help with their conservation.



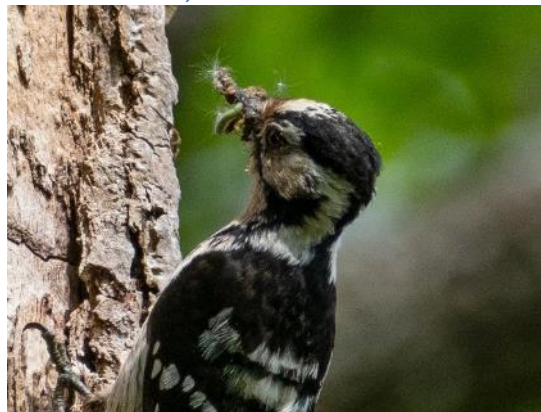
*Peter Curran – 30 March - fabulous news, I have located a pair of LSW this morning near Harrogate, North Yorkshire - absolutely over the moon to know they are still up here!*



*Detailed observations of activity at a nest made from a discreet distance by Mat Shore*



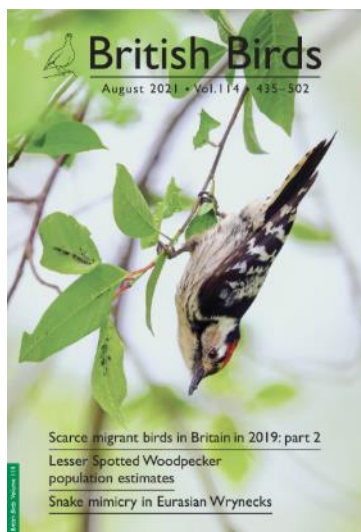
*Feeding studies - mainly aphids on 28 May in the New Forest, Mike Read*





## Lesser Spotted Woodpecker Population Estimate

Those of you who subscribe to *British Birds* will have seen our paper with Rob Clements on population estimates of Lesser Spotted Woodpeckers (Smith et al 2021). We used Lesser Spot distribution data from the many county tetrad atlases that have been published combined with the national BTO atlas (Balmer et al) to estimate the numbers of occupied tetrads through England and Wales. This suggested that there were around 2000 pairs during the last national atlas period (2007-11) which is somewhat higher than the most recent national population estimate of 1000+ breeding pairs. There is no suggestion that the population



has increased – rather we think the estimates have always been on the low side. The RBBP collate data on Lesser Spots each year and have produced some trends (Eaton et al 2021) and we are working with the panel to see how these can be developed further. Meanwhile LSW are so difficult to survey periodic local and national atlases will be the most feasible way to monitor their numbers and distribution.

## References

- Balmer D E et al** 2013 *Bird Atlas 2007-11: the breeding and wintering birds of Britain and Ireland*, BTO Books.
- Clements Rob** 2020: *The Lesser Spotted Woodpecker in Hampshire*. Hampshire Bird Report 2019
- Eaton Mark & Rare Breeding Birds Panel** 2021 *Rare breeding birds in the UK*. British Birds 114: 646-704.
- Ken Smith & Linda Smith** 2020: *Long-term trends in the nest survival and productivity of the Lesser Spotted Woodpecker Dryobates minor in Britain*. Bird Study 67:109-118
- Ken Smith, Linda Smith and Rob Clements** 2021 *Using tetrad-atlas data to estimate the numbers and recent range changes of the Lesser Spotted Woodpecker in Britain*. British Birds 114: 465-479.

Copies of these papers available on request from Ken Smith

## Acknowledgments

Thanks to everyone who has looked for Lesser Spots this year and submitted their observations to us, especially those who found and watched nests including Rob Clements, Simon Currie, Tara Dempsey, Tony Goddard, Jacqui Smith, Sue Walker & Mark Swann in the New Forest and elsewhere Indy Kiemel Greene, Mat Shore, Ricky Cleverley, Stephen Message, Matt Kirk, Paul Matson, Gerald Hinchon, Ed Stubbs, Brian Hill, Gus Robin and Matt Slaymaker. Same again in 2022 please.



## Case study in Kent: Stephen Message

*I found a male Lesser Spot on its winter home range in February. I tracked it through the spring and on 23<sup>rd</sup> April found the male on a dead Alder excavating a cavity. The following morning the male was headfirst deep in the hole with tail vertical and only just visible. On 25<sup>th</sup>, just 48 hrs after discovering the hole, the male was completely inside and spitting out wood chip constantly for the 20 minutes I was watching, his head only popping outside to drop the wood chip.*



*The nest site, marked with a red arrow, was in a wet woodland. Ken and Linda visited on 31<sup>st</sup> May when there were four young in the nest. They all fledged on 10<sup>th</sup> June*



## Diary of events at two Lesser Spotted Woodpecker territories on the Norfolk/Suffolk border.

All nest watches were made from a safe distance. Courtesy of our most experienced nest watcher Mat Shore and observers Keith Bilverstone, Ricky Cleverly, J Gaskell, Ed Keeble, J Theobald & David Walsh.

Date	Site A	Site B
Jan - Feb	♂ & ♀ heard calling and drumming on many dates	LSW on site in late Feb
Mar 22	♂ calling and feeding	
Mar - Apr		Calling and drumming birds seen by many birdwatchers
Apr 2	♂ and ♀ calling and feeding. Excavation found in willow with some woodchips	Apr 4: ♂ excavating cavity in a dead poplar
Apr 13	Calling bird but no activity at hole in Willow after a long watch	♂ working on a new cavity in a different area
Apr 24	MS found ♂ and ♀ visiting a new completed cavity in birch on 2hr watch	
Apr 25	1 changeover seen during long watch, possible incubation	
May 2	Incubating with ♂ and ♀ changeover. GSW showed interest in the hole but chased off by ♀ LSW	Possible new nest found. ♂ and ♀ seen excavating deep inside cavity
May 8	Nest contents checked with camera. ♀ incubating 3+ egg. GSW nest 80m away had 6 eggs	
May 15	♂ and ♀ feeding young & removing faecal sacs during 2 hour watch	Nest hole has been opened by a GSW but LSW ♀ still calling and drumming in area
May 22	♂ bringing caterpillars. Nest check -two small young	New nest cavity found by MS, 250m from first site. ♂ & ♀ change over seen after 70 min
May 24	♂ feeding young, 12 times in 80 mins watch, plenty of food	♂ and ♀ changing over at nest – 3 times in 3 hr watch
May 29	Two well developed ♂ chicks, see photo. Nearby GSW nest had 6 chicks about to fledge	♀ seen at nest
May 31	One chick already fledged, one about to leave the nest	♂ and ♀ feeding young
June 6		♂ and ♀ feeding young
June 17		Young still being fed
June 19		♂ chick fledged with adult ♀, two chicks ♂ & ♀ still in nest. 8 hr watch
June 20		Chicks being fed in nest by ♂ only
June 22		♂ & ♀ Chicks still in nest, fed exclusively by agitated ♂ adult.
June 23		remaining ♂ chick fledged at 09.00 and led away by adult ♂.

Key ♂ = male LSW, ♀ = female LSW

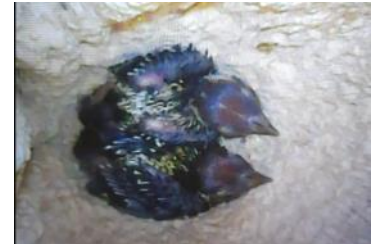
Mat Shore and the team watched these and other nests for over 500 hours taking detailed notes of the behaviour of the birds, the number of visits and the type and range of food brought for the chicks. This information is part of our long term studies to understand what is affecting breeding success



Site B, Male excavating, 4<sup>th</sup> April



Female LSW incubating, 8 May



Site A, 2 small young, 22 May



Site A, 2 male chicks, 29 May



Site B, male feeding 15 June



### Dartmoor Diary – Ed Hornchurch

On 11 February, Ed saw his first ever Lesser Spot in woodland in the Upper Teign valley and tracked down the pair in early April, feeding, calling and drumming. He returned almost daily to watch them for hours.

*'A great morning with the Upper Teign lesser spots. I watched the female feeding for a while. She hears something. Flies down the hill to the top of a tree. Calls repeatedly. The male shows up they chase each other and then settle down to feed together for a while'*. He found the female excavating on 17 April.

But then they became very secretive and hard to locate even with extensive searching. The female was seen near the excavation site on 26 May but did not go to it. Either the birds eluded Ed or they failed at an early stage possibly due to the very cold wet weather.



### Highs and Lows of New Forest Lesser Spots

Based on survey work since 2014, Rob Clements (2020) estimates that there are around 200 pairs of Lesser Spots within the New Forest National Park with 2-3 pairs per sq km in the core areas. In 2021 Rob and a team of volunteers found and observed six nests, all were successful and two illustrate the diversity of nest sites.

**The highest nest** was in a dead Oak tree at about 20 metres. It was found on 12 May when both adults were seen bringing food to the nest hole over 40 minutes of observation.

Seven further visits of about 1-2 hours were made to the site from 14 - 28 May by Sue Walker, Tony Goddard and volunteers from the RSPB South Wilts Local Group. Both adults were observed bringing in food on all but the last visit. A chick was seen at the entrance hole on 22 May. Adults removed faecal sacs on several occasions. The female was still feeding young on 26<sup>th</sup> May, but on the last visit on 28<sup>th</sup> May no activity was observed at the nest in over an hour. LSW was heard drumming about 75-100 m from the nest.

**The lowest nest**, found on 26 May, was at head height in a dead Alder.

The photo shows Ken using the nest inspection camera to photograph the chicks in the nest. Both adults were feeding two chicks which fledged a few days later.



Two chicks in the nest on 26 May.

The lowest nest and the highest both with Ken for comparison



## Indy Kiemel Greene [@GreeneIndy](#) - Sherwood Forest

It was a real privilege to find and monitor this fab Lesser Spotted Woodpecker nest in [@RSPBSherwood](#) this spring.

This is an increasingly difficult nest to track down due to the species steep decline across the UK, so I was thrilled to discover this pair had a brood of 3 chicks!

As soon as I discovered the nest in a birch tree on 18<sup>th</sup> May, I immediately contacted Ken and Linda [@lesserspotnet](#) who kindly and quickly sent me a pole camera to investigate the nest and this is what I saw! 2 males and 1 female chick huddled together.

Over the next week I got up at 3:30am every morning and spent all day observing the LSW from a safe distance. This allowed me to capture some shots of their regular feeding trips bringing caterpillars, aphids and the occasional moth.

Both adults were tending to the nest but interestingly the male spent more time at the nest than the female which is common with LSW.

As the week went on the inquisitive chicks became more and more vocal. The occasional head popping out, keen to explore beyond their tree house.

On my final visit on 24 May, I noticed the adults tending to the solitary female chick close to the nest, see photo. I scoured the woods for ages but could find no trace of the two male chicks. I believe these two chicks may have been taken from the nest by a GSW as I had seen one in the area and the LSW nest hole was opened up.

Monitoring this nest was a magical experience and I got a big tick off my bucket list. To get a selfie in the LSW T-shirt [@Lucy Lapwing](#) made for me with an actual LSW at its nest in the background, (top photo). All photos by Indy.

### Surrey success

We were about to start a Turtle Dove survey on 8 June when we got a call from Ed Stubbs who had just found an active nest in Surrey. He gave us good directions so we headed straight there. The nest in a dead branch on a live Birch was alongside a popular footpath. Both adults were feeding 3 well grown young. They fledged a couple of days later. Ed had identified seven LSW pairs in early spring and found two other nests, one was abandoned during laying and the other successfully fledged one juvenile.

### Somerset double

Gus Robin located a mating LSW pair on 11 April. He found their nest in a dead Birch on 29<sup>th</sup> and saw the male and female change over incubation duties. He watched the nest and took detailed observations on 4<sup>th</sup>, 11<sup>th</sup> and 13 May, but sadly on 22 May after a period of wet cold weather there was no activity at the nest. Newly hatched LSW chicks are very vulnerable to cold wet conditions and must have died. Matt Slaymaker found a nest on 8 June with both adults bringing good quality food. Gus Robin and Brian Hill observed the nest until at least two chicks fledged on 13 June, taking detailed notes of the number of feeding visits and food brought. This information is critical to our understanding of what is needed for successful breeding.

More info see Woodpecker Network: website [www.woodpecker-network.org.uk](http://www.woodpecker-network.org.uk) & Twitter [@lesserspotnet](#)

