

# Lesser spotted woodpecker nest recording in 2017

Ken Smith & Linda Smith, July 2017



Figure 1. Male LS at nest in Devon, photo by John Walters

Thank you to everybody who has contributed to our Woodpecker Network initiative to encourage the recording of nesting Lesser Spotted Woodpeckers. There is strong evidence that low breeding success is a factor in the widespread decline of this species and only by collecting good data from a range of sites over a period of years can we hope to understand this.

2017 is the third year of the initiative and the most successful yet; both in terms of the level of support we have received but also because the birds have had a pretty good breeding season this year too.

Our website ([www.woodpecker-network.org.uk](http://www.woodpecker-network.org.uk)) has undoubtedly helped to promote the project.

The Lesser Spotted Woodpecker remains an elusive and challenging species. This year we received reports of birds or pairs in the breeding season from 85 sites. Despite considerable efforts by all the observers, nest excavations were reported at just 20 of these sites. Not all the excavations resulted in nests with eggs or young but our final tally was 13 'active' nests. This compares with ten reported in 2015 and five in 2016. A good outcome for 2017.

Breeding success seemed good this year with only two known failures from 13 nests (Table 1). This was similar to 2015 and a great improvement on 2016 which was a particularly poor year. The raw nest success rate in 2017 (two failures in 13 nests) was good and comparable with 2015 (one possible failure in 10 nests) and much better than the poor year of 2016 (two failures in five nests). Certainly, in southern England, the weather was good right through the breeding season which must have helped.



Figure 2. Nest in Gloucestershire, photo Ken Smith

There were two failures. In Worcestershire, a nest with noisy young was apparently predated by a Great Spotted Woodpecker and in Cheshire a nest was checked late in the season and found to have six unhatched eggs which appeared to be infertile. The male was still being seen around the nest but the local team realised that he seemed to have given up incubating and was not feeding any young. It was very useful to be able to check the nest with the video camera to at least see the contents although understanding exactly what went on may prove more difficult.

**Table 1. Summary of the nests with eggs or young monitored in 2017.**

Site	Nest tree A = alive D = dead	Nest site A/D	Found during:	N° of eggs laid	N° young fledged	Estimated fledge day	Habitat	Comments
Kent (1)	Beech D	D	Feeding young	?	3	May 26	Woodland	Found just before fledge
Kent (2)	Alder D	D	Feeding young	?	2+	June 1	Woodland	Found just before fledge
Sussex (1)	Ash A	D	Excavation	5	3	June 5	Woodland edge	
Sussex (2)	Beech D	D	Feeding young	?	3	May 28	Parkland / woodland edge	Found just before fledging
New Forest (1)	Alder D	D	Feeding young	?	3	June 1	Woodland	
New Forest (2)	Birch D	D	Feeding young	?	3	May 25	Woodland	
New Forest (3)	Ash/D	D	Excavation	?	1	June 6	Woodland	Male sat tight
Devon	Birch D	D	Excavation	4	4	May 26	Woodland	
Gloucestershire	Beech D	D	Excavation	6	1	June 4	Woodland	
Herefordshire	Apple A	D	Feeding young	?	3	?	Orchard	
Norfolk	Poplar D	D	Excavation	?	?	June 7	Woodland edge	Too high for video camera
Worcestershire	Beech D	D	Feeding young	?	0		Woodland	Failed - GS predation
Cheshire	Willow A	D		6	0		Country park	Failed – egg stage



*Figure 3. Sussex (1) nest on 8th, 18th & 27 May, photos by Ken and Linda Smith*

As now seems the norm, Lesser Spots are nesting comparatively late with the mean first egg date in 2017 of April 25th. This is about a week or ten days later than Great Spotted Woodpeckers. For most nests, we were able to inspect the nest contents using our video camera on a telescopic pole.

The exception was Mat Shore's nest in Norfolk which, at 23m above ground in a huge poplar, was beyond the reach of even our camera system. Fortunately, Mat monitored the nest so well that we were able to determine fledging date.



*Figure 4. Mat's Norfolk nest, photo by Jon Theobald*

The high quality of the images from the nest cameras this year means that at many nests we have been able to determine the sex of the young before they fledge. Male pulli already have some red crown feathers before they leave the nest whereas the females have a grey crown. For the six nests where we could determine the sex of the young this year, the ratio was not statistically different from 50:50 male female but this is based on a small sample.



*Figure 5 New Forest nest 3 with two male chicks and one female, photo by Ken Smith*

**Other breeding activity:** In addition to the nests with eggs or young we received reports of birds excavating cavities at a further seven sites but with no evidence of eggs or young, see Table 2

The most extreme was Andy Sims' regular site in Lincoln where the male drummed every day from mid-February until mid-May, excavated two additional cavities but apparently failed to attract a female. Andy suspects that the female was lost last year early in the nesting cycle and has not been replaced. In 2016 the male managed to raise three chicks with no evidence that a female contributed to incubation or feeding of the young. If the female was lost in 2016 it is interesting that she was not replaced in 2017 – perhaps a symptom of a declining population.

In Staffordshire, Alan Eardley followed his birds excavating multiple cavities even losing one to Blue Tits but no active nest was ever found in the area even though a pair were seen right through to May. At a regular breeding site in Hertfordshire many birdwatchers watched Lesser Spots excavating a cavity which turned out to be unusable. When we later checked with the nest inspection camera it was clear that the excavation had broken through to the other side of the very small diameter branch. These birds presumably moved to another nest site nearby but they were not found even though they have nested in the same area for some years.

**Table 2. Summary of sites with Lesser Spotted Woodpeckers excavating cavities but no actual breeding**

Site	Tree	A/D	Comments
New Forest (4)	Alder/D	D	Male excavating April 3, hole found to be opened by GS April 25.
Surrey	Alder/D	D	Male & female mating near nest hole March 27, no more information
Hertfordshire	Beech/A	D	Pair excavating March 19 at regular site, cavity broken through when checked April 25, no nest found
Sussex (3)	Alder/D	D	Male excavating 7-9 April, cavity checked April 27, incomplete and opened by GS
Lincolnshire	Horse Chestnut/D	D	Regular site, male working on new hole March 12, drumming until mid-May, no female seen
West Midlands	Alder/D	D	Male excavating Apr 18, drumming through May, cavity empty when checked May 22
Staffordshire	Crab apple/A	D	Pair excavating cavity Apr 5, cavity taken by Blue Tit Apr 9, LS excavate new cavity Apr 12-28, cavity empty when checked May 8, pair still in area until at least May 23

The New Forest is a special place for many woodland birds and it certainly still supports good numbers of Lesser Spots. Rob Clements and Marcus Ward have been making a special study of them and this year four cavities were found three of which turned into active nests. In addition, Rob and Marcus estimated there were at least another 29 territories within their study area.

### Success or failure?

It is highly frustrating to find an excavating Lesser Spot only for the cavity not to be used for nesting but these excavations are providing useful data and insights. In some cases, such as the Hertfordshire nest in 2017, the birds still had time to excavate another cavity and nest successfully. In others, such as Staffordshire, the birds were still not nesting by late May so presumably did not nest at all. At two sites, at least there seemed to be males with no females.

Interference from Great Spotted Woodpeckers remains an issue. Even though only one nest was thought to be predated by Great Spots two of the sites where there was only excavation were opened up by them. As an additional complication, this year we have discovered that used Lesser Spot cavities are often opened up by Great Spots soon after the Lesser Spot young have fledged. This makes the interpretation of signs at the nest difficult and there will inevitably be nests where we don't know for sure whether the young got away before the Great Spots opened the hole.

For example, at a nest in the New Forest we know that three young successfully fledged but when we checked the cavity a few days later the hole had already been opened by a Great Spot. We suspect this is Great Spots exploring possible roost cavities rather than attempted predation. At another nest in the New Forest containing a single Lesser Spot chick about to fledge, we watched a juvenile Great Spot arrive at the hole entrance peck at the hole for a few minutes but then move further up the dead tree and proceed to clean out an old Great Spot cavity throwing out wood chips for 30 minutes or so. This all means we need to be careful interpreting the signs at the nest to determine the final outcome. Perhaps 'Trailcams' as used by Nick Gates and Ben Macdonald in Herefordshire last year will be the answer but these could only be used on reasonably accessible nests.

So there is much more to discover .....

## Lesser Spot Network Plans for 2018

We are planning to continue the Lesser Spot Network initiative next year and hope, as more and more observers get to know their local Lesser Spots, that more nests will be monitored. It is clear even from our data over the last three years that there is considerable annual variation in breeding success so there is no substitute for collecting more data over more years and more sites.

This year we had four nest camera systems available and we were able to lend three of these to observers to follow their own nests. Malcolm Burgess, Paul Bellamy and Will Kirby of the RSPB helped greatly in checking nest sites in the southwest and midlands, which they could fit into their busy work schedules. This worked very well with us covering nests in the southeast counties from Hampshire to Kent with the occasional trip to east Anglia. Over the winter we will review whether we need more camera/pole systems for 2018 and how they could best be deployed.

Rob Clements and Marcus Ward are planning to continue to develop their New Forest Lesser Spotted Woodpecker project next year and may be calling for more help to cover this important area.

### Acknowledgements

We owe an enormous debt to all those who reported Lesser Spots to us this year who worked hard to try to locate their nests and follow them up or helped the Lesser Spot Network project in other ways.

Nests or active excavations were found by; Richard Black, Rob Clements, Alan Eardley, John & Alison Elliott, Howard Fearn, Nick Gates, James Glendenning, Tom Griffin, Gerry Hinchon, Paul James, Brett Lewis, Ben Macdonald, Mark Mallalieu, Mat Shore, Andy Sims, Lewis Thomson, Marcus Ward, Noah Wood.

We received records or help from; Craig Albon, Dan Alder, Martin Allison, Louise Bacon, Dawn Balmer, Ashley Banwell, Keith Barnsley, Eddie Bathgate, Chris Beach, Pete Bickford, Esme Black, Peter Black, Ruth Black, Chris Bolas, Dave Bonsall, Hannah Booth, Oliver Bournat, Chloe Bradbrooke, Angela Brennan, Nick Brown, Malcolm Burgess, Robert Callf, Simon Carter, Trevor Codlin, Nick Covarr, Nick Crouch, Jeremy Dagley, Tony Davis, Chris Dee, Nick Dixon, Jono Forgham, Sue Gale, Danny Geddes, Alastair Gray, Penny Green, Lucy Grove, John Hall, Sue Harrison, Gill Hartley, Andrew Henderson, Dave & Christine Holman, Ashley Jackson, Linda Jenkinson, Dave Johnston, Simon Linington, Mandy Mackereth, Becky Matthews, Natasha Miller, Stephen Mills, Mark Musgrave, Chris Orders, Vic Parker, David Parkin, Kath Patrick, Pete Potts, Michael Prior, Geoff Ralph, John Ramm, Julie & Malcolm Redford, Lisa Rowley, Derick Scott, Tony Scott, Tom Speller, Peter Sofley, Tim Squire, Gillian Stokes, Paul Wood, Peter Van der Veken, Nicholas Watts, Jan Williamson, Jamie Wyver.



We thank all the landowners who were happy to help and allow access to their land – the RSPB, National Trust, Woodland Trust, Wildlife Trusts and many private owners.

The nest cameras we use in this project are supplied by Brian Cresswell of Wildlife Windows, see [www.wildlifewindows.co.uk](http://www.wildlifewindows.co.uk)

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Our **website** has more information on the project

[www.woodpecker-network.org.uk](http://www.woodpecker-network.org.uk)

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