

Lesser Spotted Woodpecker project – plans for 2018

Thank you to everyone who has supported our **lesser spotted woodpecker initiative** over the last three years. Thanks to all your efforts we have been able to collect good data on nesting success from over 30 nests between 2015 and 2017 and we have been able to raise the profile of this enigmatic species. **Please help with the project this year.**

The annual reports for the first three years are all available on our website. So far, we have had two years with good breeding success and one very poor one (2016). You may recall that one of the motivations behind the initiative was to check whether the poor breeding success found in the intensive RSPB studies in 2008-11 was widespread in the population. I suppose the answer so far is a resounding maybe. The low breeding success in 2016 was widespread amongst hole nesting species and was probably linked to poor weather conditions. Even great spotted woodpeckers, which normally have high breeding success, did relatively badly in 2016. In both 2015 and 2017, lesser spot breeding success was pretty good. We have to see what 2018 and subsequent years bring?



We still need your help in gathering more data, so in 2018 we are planning more of the same – trying to find as many lesser spotted woodpecker nests as possible and trying to ensure that we monitor the contents and outcomes. Lesser spot nest finding is still a big challenge, but persistence is often well rewarded. One of the most reliable ways of finding lesser spot nests is to check out the site they used last year! Obviously, you must start somewhere but as more and more people get involved and more sites are found each year this becomes more feasible.

I won't repeat them here but there are plenty of tips on our website to help you pin down your nesting birds once you have located a territory. But it is still a challenge to your field skills. In 2017 there were 13 nests found but we know for sure that there were over 100 territories being checked.

Many of you have been good enough to tell us about birds you have found during the breeding season even when no nest was found. This is great, and we have come to realise that by doing this systematically we have the makings of a way of monitoring trends in the population. Because of low numbers, lesser spotted woodpecker dropped off annual monitoring schemes such as the BBS long ago. By recording presence and absence and known nests at regular sites each year we should be able to generate a population index of sorts. Obviously, there will be biases with this approach but at least it will give us a good idea whether the decline is still continuing. The 2007/11 BTO atlas showed lesser spot range has contracted markedly over the last few decades but it could well be that they are still doing okay in some of their remaining core areas.

We are pleased that there are some local initiatives starting this year. In the North East the **Durham Bird Club** are making a big effort to check out their known historic lesser spot sites. This is already being rewarded with birds found in areas where it was thought they had gone entirely. It will be interesting once the season is over to analyse what has happened to the population there.

We hope that **other counties** will be encouraged to take a similar approach. Although ideally we still want people to find and report active nests, for this presence/absence monitoring all we need is

confirmation that birds were present and calling/displaying in suitable habitat sometime between February and July. Of course, we also need to know about the negatives – historic sites which were thoroughly checked through spring and no birds found.

There are still good numbers of lesser spots in and around **the New Forest** and Rob Clements and Marcus Ward have been putting in a big effort into finding territorial birds and nests. This work will be continuing into 2018 and Rob and Marcus would like to hear about any records you have and particularly if you happen across a nest. In 2017 we monitored four nests in the New Forest but there must be many more to be found.

Ben MacDonald has studied and written about lesser spots in **Hereford & Worcester**, and with Nick Gates has been monitoring nests there for some years. The landscape there seems to suit them, and Ben has started an initiative this year to try to locate as many pairs as possible in the corridor to the west of the Malvern Hills running from the Wyre Forest south to Ledbury. The Wyre Forest is a known lesser spot hot spot (one nest there in 2017 and one of the original RSPB study sites) but, from his experience in the area, Ben is sure that there are also good numbers in the traditional mixed landscape of fields, hedgerows and orchards that runs to the south.



Nest recording This year we are again offering to help you inspect lesser spot nest contents either by lending you a camera system or arranging to visit the nest with you. We appreciate that there are concerns about disturbance to lesser spots at or near the nest and our policy is to respect the finders wishes when it comes to site confidentiality.

Don't be afraid to go and look for nests. There is some evidence that chronic disturbance when the birds are excavating a

cavity in early spring can be an issue. We have heard of a couple of cases of birds deciding to move elsewhere from potential sites with lots of close observers present over a long period. It is always difficult to prove but it does seem that the birds may be quite sensitive at this time and observers need to be aware of this and give the birds their best chance. Once they are feeding young, the birds seem so focussed on their task that they largely ignore observers. This is the most rewarding time to view and photograph lesser spots without causing disturbance.

Having searched for and found many lesser spotted woodpecker nests over the years I don't think regular walking through the woods checking for signs of nesting causes any significant disturbance. If a possible nest is found my system is to lean a dead branch against a tree trunk to mark the spot (it is amazing how difficult it can be to relocate a tree without this, even now we have good GPS), move away and only revisit every week or so to check on progress. Having monitored over 50 lesser spot nests I have found no problems with this approach.

Good luck finding lesser spots in 2018.

Ken and Linda Smith – Woodpecker Network – www.woodpecker-network.org.uk

Contacts:

Any/all lesser spot observations ken.smith.lsw@gmail.com

Help Durham Bird Club dbc.records@hotmail.co.uk

New Forest records Rob Clements richard.clements3@virgin.net and marcus.zoe@sky.com

Help in Herford & Worcester wildlife.mac@gmail.com and nick@nicholasgates.co.uk

Photographs, LSW in Devon by John Walters and LSW chicks in nest by Ken & Linda Smith