

Lesser Spotted Woodpeckers in 2024

Woodpecker Network Breeding Season Report

Website: www.woodpecker-network.org.uk

A huge thank you to everyone who volunteered for Woodpecker Network this year, noting sightings of Lesser Spotted Woodpeckers and searching for nests and observing outcomes.

2024 was one of the poorest breeding seasons for LSWs since we created Woodpecker Network in 2015. The crude average was only 1.3 young fledged per nest which is lower than the previous poor year of 2016 when 1.5 fledged per nest.

To put 2024 into context this diagram shows the crude nest success, measured as the number of young fledged, from 2015 to 2024. With a high of 3.6 per nest.

Despite massive efforts to find them, only nine nests were reported and monitored and these were relatively unsuccessful. This was probably linked to the low success rate with many nests presumably failing before they got to the stage of noisy young when many nests are first located. We will do a full nest success/nest survival analysis taking this all into account in due course.

In the southwest, Gus Robin and Ewan Flynn worked hard to monitor four nests, only two of which were successful, one on Dartmoor fledged one chick the other in the Quantocks, two.

In Norfolk, Mat Shore found his usual pair high in a Poplar and at least two young successfully fledged from what was a very early nest for the year. See photo of one of the fledgelings by Keith Bilverstone

In the New Forest, we, together with Rob Clements and Mark Swann, only found/monitored three nests even though we knew the birds were still around and on several other territories. One nest failed, one fledged only one chick the other at least two. Tom Gibson and Ian Wells each reported a nest at a late stage, but the outcomes are not known.

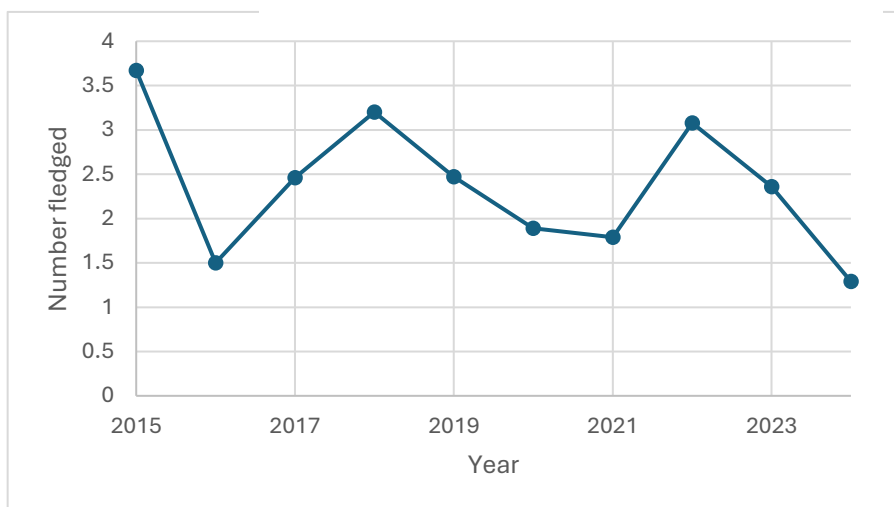
In Kent Stephen Message did brilliantly to locate his nesting pair slightly away from their usual spot just before the four young fledged.

In the Wyre Forest Connor Coombes found a fledgling being fed by the adult female on 26 May.

Why was 2024 so poor? Analysing our ten years' worth of LSW data it seems the birds were hit with a double whammy – April and May of 2024 were both warm and wet. In particular, the warm April meant that the defoliating caterpillars, that the birds depend on for part of the chick rearing period, would have peaked long before the LSWs were feeding their young. It also seems that the numbers of defoliating caterpillars in 2024 were low anyway. The very wet May added further problems for the birds finding food for their chicks leading to brood reduction or nest failures. It is interesting that the RSPB studies between 2005 and 2009 found a negative impact on breeding success of wet weather in May.



Adult male LSW at the Somerset nest photo Ewan Flynn



On positive note, we have tried out two technical innovations which will certainly help us in future.

Thermal Imaging

South West Optics in Torquay generously loaned Gus Robin two high end thermal imagers to see if they could be used to locate woodpecker and other nests from their thermal signal. The answer was a resounding 'yes' with good thermal signals from the known LSW nests and many new nests of Green and Great Spotted woodpeckers located from 'cold'. The technique looks so potentially useful that we have already purchased an imager for next year – a Hicmicro Falcon FQ35 for those who know about these things.



*Thermal image of a GSW nest in Somerset when the adult was incubating. The nest hole and chamber are clearly visible as the orange colour Ewan Flynn is standing under the nest.
Photos - Gus Robin*

Passive Acoustic Monitoring

Our second piece of kit is a Wildlife Acoustics Song Meter Mini sound recorder which we have deployed in known LSW territories in the New Forest. We set it to record all day from early February until mid-May. Naomi Addleton did a brilliant job keeping the kit running through all the good and bad weather of late winter/early spring and we managed two five day recording sessions at each of nine LSW sites. There were two objectives. Firstly, to see whether Passive Acoustic Monitoring could be used as a tool for monitoring LSWs and secondly to collect lots of recordings of UK LSWs which could be used to build an automatic system for identifying LSWs from sound recordings. We are collaborating with the BTO who are developing a 'woodpecker' module for their Acoustic Pipeline site which will make it easy to process large amounts of acoustic data.

We did well on both objectives. LSWs were detected at all the nine sites and we now have recordings of 8000 LSW drums and 300 calls to train the classifier. We also have a good idea of the likelihood of detecting a LSW from acoustic signals. Outside the New Forest we tried the system at three possible LSW sites in Sussex and managed to detect LSW at one of them.

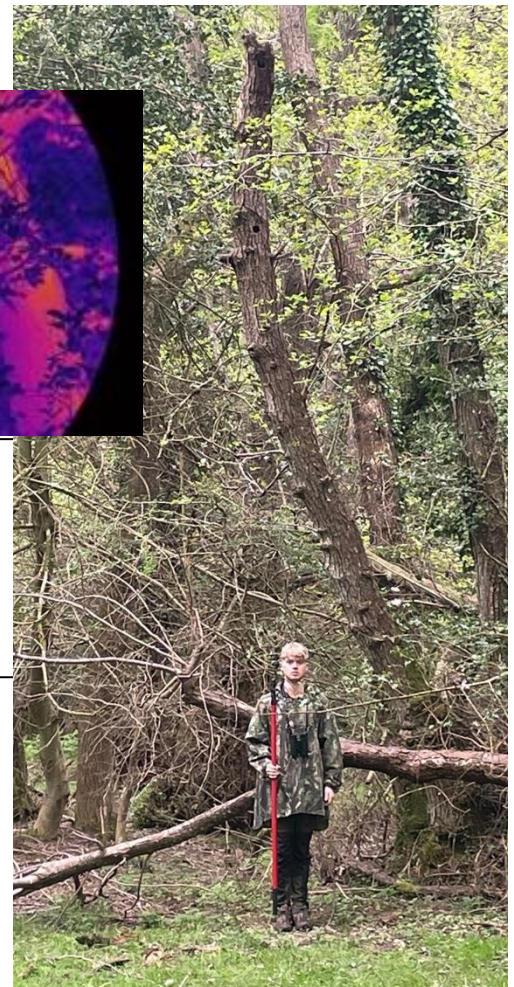
Thanks to a grant from the Hampshire Ornithological Society the BTO are now able to complete the development of the classifier and HOS has purchased three more Wildlife Acoustics Song Meter Minis to be used for recording LSWs and other key bird species in Hampshire over the next few years.

In a similar vein we did some systematic work with playback to see if this increased the likelihood of detecting LSWs. Sadly, this was not successful at all. We know playback is being used in Germany to monitor all species of woodpeckers so we need to investigate further to see if we are missing any tricks.

Thank you to all the volunteers who searched for Lesser Spots throughout the breeding season and funders of our work. In the southwest Gus Robin was supported by Ewan Flynn and other volunteers, including Brian Hill, Andy Harris and Simon Davies. Thanks go to the Somerset Ornithological Society too. Tom Williams and Ed Horncastle spent much time to help expand knowledge of Devon LSW territories.

Mat Shore, Keith Bilverstone, Jonathan and the team in Norfolk. Rob Clements, Mark Swann, Simon Currie, Tara Dempsey and Geoff Dicker in the New Forest; Matt Kirk in Sussex and Stephen Message in Kent. Also, thanks to Russell at South West Optics, Torquay for loan of the thermal imaging camera.

Words by Ken and Linda Smith – Woodpecker Network - October 2024



LSW Chick looking out of Norfolk nest K Bilverstone