Lesser Spotted Woodpeckers

Woodpecker Network 2026 Breeding Season Report

Thanks to the continued support from the network of Lesser Spotted Woodpecker volunteers, we have made major strides this year in understanding the birds and their needs as well as raising the profile of the species.



LSW at its nest found by Jack Parkin in the New Forest

Acoustic Monitoring – finding more LSW

Following the publication of our paper in *British Birds* on acoustic monitoring of LSWs (Smith *et al.* Dec 2025) there has been lots of interest with acoustic searches for LSWs in many new areas – we know of 12 counties plus Wales with LSW recording this year. In Herefordshire and Gloucestershire Woodpecker Network volunteers deployed recorders in suitable woodland and some traditional orchards and successfully located LSW in new areas.

Many of these are the first tentative steps towards finding LSWs but in Sussex and Hampshire (away from the New Forest), where we have been doing acoustic work for a few years already, we have tried a more systematic, habitat based, approach. In the Sussex Weald, with funding from Sussex Ornithological Society, we deployed recorders in 140 x 1km squares selected on the basis of broadleaved woodland cover and wetness. LSWs were detected in over 40% of the monads meaning the region is a previously unrecognised stronghold for the species.

A similar approach in Hampshire away from the New Forest funded by Hampshire Ornithological Society came up with a much lower detection rate (nearer 10% of 1km with LSWs) which is probably related to the extent of broadleaved woodland in the landscape.

Below: Mini and Micro Sound Recorders and a Mini being set up in the woods by Ken.





Recording outcomes of LSW nests



We have not lost sight of Woodpecker Network's core activity of locating and recording the outcomes of LSW nests. 2026 was a record year. With more people in different areas getting involved a total 28 nests were monitored (see table) plus three sites where recently fledged young indicated that there had been a nest nearby. With this year's nests we have now monitored just over 200 nests since we started Woodpecker Network in 2015 – quite a milestone.

Our exclusive pin badge for LSW nest finders

The numbers of nests monitored in 2026 and the totals from 2015 onwards.

County	Nests in 2026	Nests from 2015 - 2026
Buckinghamshire	1	2
Cheshire		2
Derbyshire		2
Devon	3	13
Essex		1
Greater London		1
Greater Manchester		1
Gloucestershire		2
Hampshire	9	75
Herefordshire	1	7
Hertfordshire		2
Kent	5	16
Lincolnshire		2
Norfolk	1	15
Nottinghamshire		6
Shropshire		2
Somerset	3	17
Suffolk		3
Surrey	1	8
Sussex	3	18
West Glamorgan		1
Wiltshire		2
Worcestershire	1	3
Total	**28**	**201**

Nesting success- how does 2026 compare?
This spring was extremely warm and our first egg dates were the earliest we have ever recorded. This marks a run of three years (2024, 25 and 26) with very warm springs but 2026 was the warmest. Overall productivity was good at 2.75 young per nest but not as high as the record year of 2025 (3.8 young per nest).

Some nest studies from LesserSpotNet volunteers
Buckinghamshire: In April a Lesser Spot was seen flying over a field towards woodland and David Bevan, our sharp-eyed observer watched it to a large dead Beech tree where it was found to be excavating. A small team monitored progress through the egg laying and incubation periods. Ken and Linda visited with the nest camera on 2 May when the six eggs were just hatching with three tiny young visible. Both adults provisioned the nest with a good supply of caterpillars and aphids. A further visit on 17th revealed six male young almost ready to fledge. David watched them fledge over two days on 22 and 23 May.
This was the earliest and most successful nest of 2026.


David was awarded a well-deserved LSW pin badge.



New Forest, Hampshire, remains the stronghold for Lesser Spots. Rob Clements, Simon Currie, Tara Dempsey, Jack Parkin and Mark Swan found and monitored nine nests between them. This includes the nest, found by Ron Taylor, featured in the BBC Countryfile piece, with data from excavation to fledging.

Norfolk – one nest was monitored by Keith Bilverstone and the team in the 'Glade' for the tenth year running. Excavating birds were reported from a well-known site near Thetford but no further information was forthcoming.

Devon and Somerset – co-ordinated by Gus Robin six nests were monitored. Ed Horncastle found his LSW pair excavating on 25th March in Devon and we followed their progress via enchanting videos posted on his BlueSky feed @edhorncastle.bsky.social until the two chicks fledged successfully on 26 May.

Sussex – Matt Kirk and Alistair Grey found two nests in East Sussex. One was too high and hidden in the top of a Beech tree to gather much data, the other was monitored successfully. A late nest found by Jack Barnes had three well grown chicks on 2nd June.

Surrey – one nest was found at a late stage; there must be many more to find in this well wooded county.


Bucks nest on 2nd May chicks just hatching


Six well grown male young on 17th May.


The Bucks nest was so high we could only just reach it with the nest camera with two extra poles added. Photo by David Bevan

Wales – Stuart Keenor put in a huge effort to discover a LSW nest in Wales but with no luck. He is confident LSW are breeding, it is just a question of finding them. The challenge will continue in 2027

Herefordshire – we have not heard much until now from this lovely county, but this year Toby Fountain and Ella Currie, supported by Stuart Keenor, established an enthusiastic Woodpecker Network local group. As well as doing some sound recording, the group surveyed likely woodland and orchards for LSW throughout the county. One nest was found and monitored in a traditional orchard.



Some of the Herefordshire team with Ken & Linda, - L to R Toby, Tom, William, Ken, Sue, Stuart and Linda

Not all good news - Sadly, this year we observed two nest failures. At one, three well grown, feathered young were found dead in the cavity just before they were large enough to fledge. Our only thought was that the adult attending the nest had died/been predated and they were not fed.
At a second site the nest was very low down by a footpath and became well known to birders and photographers. Unfortunately, the female was very disturbed by this constant attention and the nest failed around hatching when the attendance of both the male and female is usually needed to keep the young warm. Sadly, this was a reminder that our policy of secrecy about nests sites remains so important.

Photographers – do you have photos/videos of LSW bringing food to the nest from 2026 or earlier?



These could provide valuable information about what chicks are being fed and help us understand whether food supply is contributing to poor breeding success & how it correlates with weather conditions. Our trials with Matt Livsey at Natural England have confirmed that photos can provide useful information about chick diet, with entomologists able to identify many of the prey items brought to nests to a useful level. If you have any such photos, please get in touch via our website, where there are more details. All information will be treated in strict confidence.

Kent – In the Blean woodlands David Smith organised the regular early spring survey of drumming birds. In May volunteers Heather Mathieson, Paul Cox, Jonathon Dodds and Connor Murphy found and monitored four successful nests. As in previous years a nest was found elsewhere by Stephen Message.



The nest camera skilfully manoeuvred by Jonathon

Worcestershire after success last year with 3 nests found, only one was reported this year.



Congratulations to Rufus Dawson, for this well-deserved BTO Award. He is an active Woodpecker Network volunteer and his Passive Acoustic Monitoring for Lesser Spots in Gloucestershire and Avon is contributing greatly to our understanding of this elusive species @rufusdawson.bsky.social

Looking Ahead - The other positive news this year is that Natural England, as part of their Species Recovery Programme, have given a contract to a consortium led by RSPB for LSW work. There will be a national survey using acoustic methods in 2028 with pilot work in 2027 (RSPB/BTO) and a project looking at woodland wetness, invertebrate foods and LSWs starting next year (RSPB). It is brilliant to see these projects going forward and a testament to all the work of us volunteers in developing the ideas behind the new projects.

Woodpecker Network volunteers' workshop
In March we organised our second LSW workshop based in the Blean Woods in Kent. We held it over the weekend to make it easier for volunteers to attend and had 25 attendees with 15 excellent presentations covering all the main LSW areas and studies. This took up the whole of Saturday but on Sunday morning, led by Heather Mathieson, Jonathan Dodds and Dave Smith, we all headed out to East Blean Woods to catch up with the woodpeckers. Despite a very damp and murky morning we were not disappointed with plenty of LSW calling and drumming and some good sightings of the birds themselves. If there was ever any doubt, the Blean Woods complex really is an important area for LSWs. Thanks to NE for their funding towards volunteer expenses for the workshop.

Lesser Spots in the spotlight
We have been involved in a couple of high profile broadcasts this year. Thanks to an initiative from Mark Mallalieu, in March we featured in a U Tube video with Chris Packham in East Sussex covering acoustic monitoring for LSWs but then moving to their ecology and conservation. It was a real privilege for us all to work with Chris and you can view the video on https://www.ecotalk.co.uk/community-stories/from-mystery-to-discovery .

Out of the blue, in early June right at the very end of the LSW nesting season Ken was contacted by BBC **Countryfile** who wanted a piece about LSWs in the New Forest. There was one late nest still active so Linda and Ken were filmed and interviewed inspecting this nest. We ended up with a 6-minute slot on the programme which is not bad for peak time TV. You can watch on BBC iPlayer Countryfile – 'Hampshire's Secret Wildside' first broadcast on 21 June, it is almost at the end of the show.

Acknowledgements to all our supporters
Thanks to Network Regional Co-ordinators, Gus Robin (Southwest), Stuart Keenor (Wales and West Midlands) and Heather Mathieson (Kent) and all our volunteers including Naomi Addleton, Jack Barnes, David Bevan, Malcolm Burgess, Keith Bilverstone, Rob Clements, Paul Cox, Simon Currie, Ella Curry, Rufus Dawson, Tara Dempsey, Jonathan Dodds, Tom Genders, Toby Fountain, Alistair Grey, Sue Griffen, Andy Harris, Ed Horncastle, Matt Kirk, William Lambourne, Mark Mallalieu, Stephen Message, Connor Murphy, Jack Parkin, Viv Quinn, Craig Reed, Ed Stubbs, David Smith, Mark Swann and Ron Taylor. Special thanks to Mat Shore who found and monitored nests every year in Norfolk and Suffolk from the outset of Woodpecker Network, but changes in family circumstances mean he can't put masses of time into LSWs anymore.



Woodpecker Network volunteers at the LSW Workshop in Kent in March and below watching LSW in the Blean Woods the next morning





Chris Packham talks all things Lesser Spotted with Ken Smith, Mark Mallaleiu and Linda Smith for an Ecotalk video in March



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