

Lesser Spotted Woodpeckers in 2023

Woodpecker Network Breeding Season Report

Website: www.woodpecker-network.org.uk

Thanks to the efforts of all our LesserSpotNet collaborators we were able to collect breeding data from 21 Lesser Spotted Woodpecker nests in 2023.

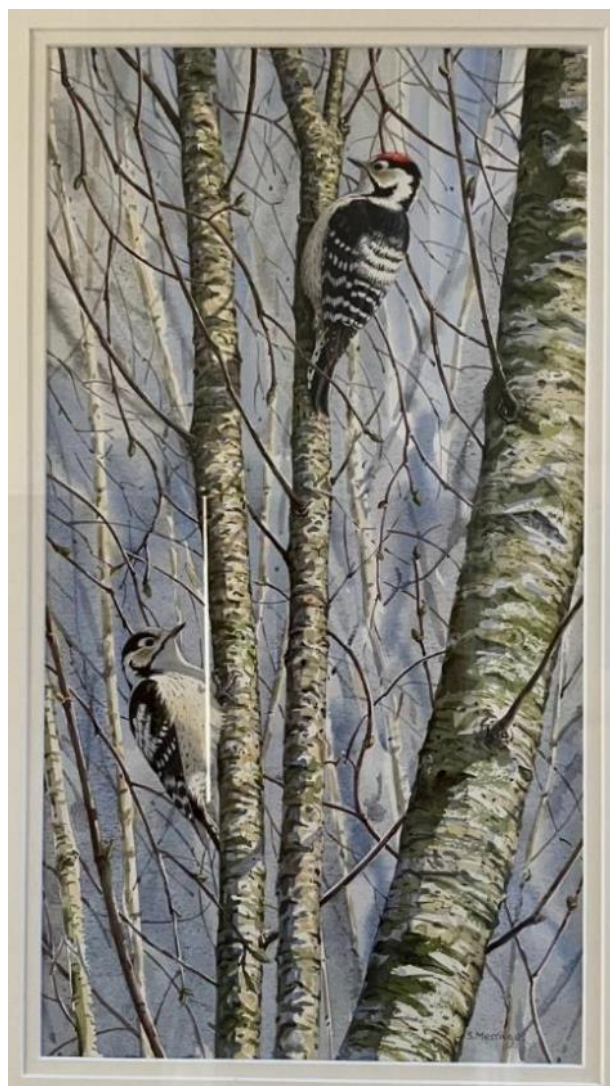
It was a very mixed breeding season but, overall, the number of young fledged was 2.4 young per nest, pretty much in line with the long term average.

The nests monitored in 2023 were from nine counties with most in Hampshire and Somerset. Thanks to a dedicated team in the New Forest, Hampshire continues to be the key county. In Somerset concerted efforts by a small team led by Gus Robin resulted in five nests being found, doubling the county total since 2015. It was great news that a nest was found in Essex at a site with regular records of drumming and calling birds – the first nest monitored in Essex since the project started in 2015.

The grand total of nests monitored since 2015 now stands at 135 nests from 21 counties, see Table below.

2023 was one of the latest breeding seasons we have recorded with a median first egg date of May 4th about five days later than the mean date for 2015-23.

County	Nests in 2023	Nests from 2015 - 2023
Cheshire		2
Derbyshire		2
Devon	1	6
Essex	1	1
Greater London		1
Greater Manchester		1
Gloucestershire		2
Hampshire	9	51
Herefordshire		4
Hertfordshire		2
Kent	1	8
Lincolnshire		2
Norfolk	1	12
Nottinghamshire		6
Shropshire		1
Somerset	5	10
Suffolk	1	2
Surrey	1	7
Sussex	1	11
West Glamorgan		1
Wiltshire		2
Worcestershire		1
Total	21	135



Lesser Spot pair in Kent by artist Stephen Message

Early nests did very well with five or six young fledged but later nests did relatively badly and we know of three nest failures (one during incubation and two when feeding young). We were also aware of three completed cavities where, as far as we know, no eggs were laid.

The lateness of the season was very frustrating for all us observers. Right through April nothing much seemed to be happening and it was not until May that nests started to be found. Consequently, only five nests were found during incubation with the mean clutch of only 4.2 eggs – only a small sample size but worryingly low.

The number of young fledged from successful nests was an average of 3.0 chicks. This is in line with previous years but the high numbers of failures in 2023 brought the overall fledging figure down. It seems the cool conditions right through April were holding the birds back and the ones which were able to start laying relatively early were by far the most successful.

The information in this Newsletter was gathered by LesserSpotNet volunteer observers and collated by Linda and Ken Smith.

Nest Studies from LesserSpotNet volunteers

Norfolk/Suffolk

Lesser Spots were seen/heard from seven locations in the breeding season with two successful nests monitored for LesserSpotNet. Mat Shore, Nick Moran and their team of volunteers watched the sites from January onwards.

At site W, a female was seen and heard calling and drumming in January. A male was reported in early February but not seen again. Further visits through March had the female calling and drumming persistently moving round the site. On one visit a second female, a young bird, was seen. Observations continued until May with the female drumming persistently, but it seems she did not find a mate.

At site C, a male was observed drumming on visits from January until May. With only one report of a female in mid-March, the male was the only LSW seen and appeared to be unpaired. On 19 March between 6:25 and 8:30 Mat Shore heard four drumming sessions; one lasting 42 minutes was a virtuoso performance.

At site E, Nick Moran found a female feeding and calling at the site on 26 February and maintained close observations over the whole nesting period. A second bird was seen on 2nd April and on 7th both male and female were located excavating in a poplar and copulating two days later. Nick also watched them mobbing and chasing off a Great Spotted Woodpecker that landed on the nest tree. On 30th April over a three hour watch from 05:09am, Nick saw both birds. Although it was too high in the tree to be inspected with a nest camera, Nick noted the head colour of the chicks and watched five young leave the nest on 5th June. One had already fledged so an amazing six young fledged. (See more on Nick's Twitter feed @sconebirding). He was also able to collect valuable data on the provisioning rates at this very successful nest. In an epic 8 hour watch – the big sit – he counted the female make 116 feeding visits, one every 4.1 minutes. He had been concerned when the male disappeared in late May, but the female continued to feed the chicks to successful fledging.

Site G was visited regularly by Mat Shore, KB and JP. On 5th February a male was calling and drumming. On 7 April simultaneous drumming was heard from different parts of the site and later a male and female were seen together. The male had started an excavation (A) and the birds were seen copulating. There was no further work on the cavity until 16th when the pair were seen and the male was excavating at hole A again. Over several visits the LSW were elusive and no further activity was found. The weather in April was cold and wet and seemed to inhibit progress with nest cavity excavation. Then on 7 May, Mat Shore found a fresh LSW sized hole (B) in a different area of the site. Returning very early (5:00am) the next day, Mat watched the adults changing over, confirming the birds were incubating eggs. The team monitored the nest carefully.



LSW near its nest in Norfolk, photo Keith Bilverstone



LSW female excavating at site E, photo Nick Moran



Male (left) and female (right) chicks have different head colours, and can be distinguished in the nest, photos Nick Moran



Male bringing food to the nest in a dead Poplar branch at Site G, photo Keith Bilverstone.

Norfolk/Suffolk, continued

On 19th May the adults were bringing in small amounts of food so the chicks must have hatched. On 27th May and subsequently only the male was provisioning the nest, bringing food and removing faecal sacs. The chicks fledged successfully on 7th June. The nest was at the top of a Poplar so nest inspection was not possible but the heads of at least two different chicks were seen at the nest hole. At a follow up visit on 10th June the nest hole had been opened up, probably by a Great Spotted Woodpecker.

At site S, where LSW had nested previously, birds were calling in early February but no breeding was reported.

At site K, Lesser Spots were seen and heard from late March onwards. The habitats that looked most likely to attract LSW were searched on several visits, but there was no luck in finding a nest.

Essex

A nest near Chelmsford is the first in Essex to be monitored by LesserSpotNet. Stuart Booker heard at least two chicks calling from a lone Silver Birch stump on the edge of some woods on 5th June and the male was feeding them. The young were still in the nest on 8th and had fledged by the afternoon of the 9th.

Sussex

Volunteers looked for Lesser Spots in the woods where nests were found in previous years, but with no luck. One fully excavated cavity was found near Heathfield but for some reason the Lesser Spots did not continue with it. At the end of the season Mark & Rich saw a Lesser Spot carrying food in woods near Crawley, but despite a search they could not find the nest. Returning the next day they did find the nest but the chicks had fledged.

Kent

Stephen Message watched something amazing at his local Lesser Spot nest where there were 4 possibly 5 young. On 1st June he saw a Long-tailed Tit look into the nest. Then in the evening of 5th June he watched 3 young LSW fledge leaving one in the nest. As he continued to watch the Long-tailed Tit fed the remaining youngster. The following morning in a 2-hour watch, there was no sign of the adult LSW and the long-tail continued to feed the LSW chick. Long-tailed Tit helpers are known to feed at LTT nests, but we think this is the first time it has been observed at a woodpecker nest. Watch the video of the LTT at the LSW nest on Stephen's Twitter feed @BenendenKent.

Reports from the Blean complex of woods round Canterbury, indicated at least 18 Lesser Spot territories, but we don't think these were followed up for nesting. The Blean woodlands are still a stronghold for LSW.



These three photos illustrate some of the different types of nest sites chosen by Lesser Spots. In Norfolk (site G) the nest is high in a dead branch in a Poplar, photo by Mat Shore.



The Essex nest in a birch stump. (Photo by Stuart Booker)

This shows the height, 4m and diameter, 20cm of the tree and the direction the nest hole facing, north-east.



This nest in Kent is in a dead Alder (Photo by Matt Kirk) Lesser Spots always make their nest cavity in a dead tree or dead branch but it can be low or high.



A Long-tailed Tit feeding the remaining Lesser Spot chick in the Kent nest. Photo by Stephen Message.

Surrey

Right at the end of the season a nest was found on 7th June in a tree hanging over the river Mole. This proved a challenge to inspect with the nest camera, but perseverance revealed four well grown young almost ready to fledge. There are still good numbers of Lessers in Surrey, but access to the mainly private sites is often difficult.

Somerset

In Somerset, Gus Robin lead a team (including Brian Hill) focussing on finding Lesser Spotted Woodpecker territories in the hills and valleys of the Quantocks. It was long suspected that there were more birds there than everybody realised and sure enough the team found five nests and, conservatively, four other territories. The first nest was found by chance on 22nd April close to a popular footpath by Jennifer Earl. A male was excavating a cavity. Over the next three weeks both male and female were watched at the nest. On 16 May Gus saw a Great Spot land at the nest and be chased off by the Lesser Spot. A nest inspection on 20th May showed three chicks which had died just after hatching and two unhatched eggs.

Gus and Brian found three nests and Penny Wills also found one. With a LesserSpotNet nest inspection camera, Gus was able to check three of them, one had three well grown male chicks (see photo) which fledged on 5th June. The second had four eggs and a large slug and seemed to be abandoned. It was later predated and the hole opened. The third was 10m high in a dead Alder, with some clever improvisation of the camera kit, Gus saw three chicks. The fourth nest really was too high and young fledged successfully on 2nd June.

Devon

A nest at a well-known site was discovered in late April. It was very close to the road with parking nearby and every day photographers gathered to film activity at the nest. This was a cause of concern, but fortunately, the birds seemed to ignore all this attention and successfully fledged

two chicks (one male, one female) on 12th June.

Checks with the nest camera show the LSW chicks just hatching on 21 May, top photo, 3 chicks & 2 eggs. They are so tiny and vulnerable and easily get chilled. Nine days later two chicks remain and are starting to grow feathers. They both fledged successfully on 12 June.



Gus Robin with the LesserSpotNet nest inspection camera, checking a nest in the Quantocks



Lesser Spots chicks (3 males) in the nest cavity in the Quantocks on 3 June, photo Gus Robin



An abandoned LSW nest with eggs in a dead Alder in the Quantocks plus a slug. Photo by Ken & Linda Smith



Adult male at the nest in a dead birch in Devon. Photo by Bill Coulson on 16 May

Worcestershire and Sherwood Forest

Lesser Spots were seen, see photo on p6, but this year no further information was made available.

The New Forest, Hampshire

As usual the New Forest yielded the most nests with nine monitored by the volunteer team. Two nests were found in April and were inspected to get the clutch size (number of eggs laid). The rest were found in late May and early June when the adults were feeding young. The numbers fledged were low, 2 nests with 3 chicks, 4 with 2 chicks and one with one chick. One nest was predated, probably by a Great Spot, and one fully formed cavity was not used.

Lesser Spot numbers in the New Forest

In the last newsletter we mentioned the survey of Lesser Spots in Hampshire in 2022 organised by Ken Smith with Rob Clements on behalf of Hampshire Ornithological Society. The full results of the survey have now been analysed and the report has been published in the 2022 Hampshire Bird Report. The take home message is that the survey shows there are about 300 LSW territories in Hampshire, the bulk of which are in the New Forest. With an estimated national population of 2000 pairs* in 2011, the New Forest is clearly the most important site for the species in Britain.

**Ref: Ken Smith, Linda Smith and Rob Clements, British Birds August 2021 Vol114, pp435-502*

How to find a woodpecker nest – look for wood chips



Ken found a nest excavation in this dead Birch by spotting small wood chips at the base of the tree, see photo below.



Male LSW on territory in April in the New Forest, photo by Joe Downing



Rob Clements and Ken Smith looking for nests along a stream in the New Forest on 19 April (they found two!)



Clutch of 3 eggs on 17 May, photo by Tara Dempsey



Three female chicks (note no red on their heads) in a nest in a dead Alder on 6th June, they fledged on 10th

Plans for 2024 – find and watch more LSW nests
Start looking in February, Lesser Spots are active, calling and drumming, and you can see them before the leaves come out. Find LSW excavating in April. Find them feeding at the nest mid-May to mid-June. **Don't give up – keep looking.**

More from the New Forest from Geoff Dicker's Diary

Geoff was out searching for LSWs on 22 days from 6th February until 3rd May. He found LSWs on all but four days at eleven different sites. He estimates that he walked 214 'shoe leather miles', in reality 'wellington boot' miles given the wet conditions in the New Forest. But he says, "I can't think of anything at my age that I would rather be doing". He has sent us detailed notes of his observations which are valuable in tracking down nesting sites and estimating numbers of birds. For example some extracts from Geoff's diary:

Date	Time	Gender	Location	Notes on behavior
10 Feb	07.45	Pair	Site 1	Pair in top of "usual" tree drumming & calling – many "year-listers" present!
10 Feb	10.15	Not obs	Site 2	Bird drumming & seen briefly in flight.
13 Feb	08.00	Male	Site 3	Male seen & heard drumming.
13 Feb	10.15	Not obs	Site 4	Bird heard calling.
15 Feb	07.45	Male	Site 5	Male bird seen in last year's nest hole – roosting? No other activity observed.

And later in the season

4 April	09.15	Male	Site 6	Male seen drumming & calling.
4 April	09.30 to 11.15	Pair	Site 6	Two birds calling & drumming but female not seen. Male seen & heard almost constantly between 09.15 & 11.15 "commuting" mainly between the two points using 5 oak/beechnut. When I was leaving however, he was in an oak tree at the far end of the territory.
4 April	11.25	Male	Site 7	Male calling & drumming. Heard from a distance then observed in the same tree as a GSW which was also drumming and giving alarm calls. GSW left tree still calling. LSW seen well & continued to drum and call before flying off. This may have been the Site 6 bird? This is my first observation of an LSW at this location.
8 April	07.20	Pair	Site 1	Pair in top of "usual" tree – birds hesitant to drum as a pair of GSW's had also been using the drumming post. Male used another nearby oak.
8 April	07.50	Male	Site 6	At one point the male LSW was drumming in the same tree with a pair of GSW's. I have not definitely observed the female LSW since 3 April.

Geoff observed that the silent days were cloudy with sunny intervals but fresh to strong winds. When the sun shone the LSWs were much in evidence. This is the experience of other observers too. Given the lateness of the breeding season in 2023 it is possible that the birds had not started serious nesting when Geoff stopped his observations. It is worth revisiting all the locations in late May to early June to pick up the adults feeding young.

Acknowledgements

Huge thanks to all those who followed Lesser Spots through the season, looked for nests and especially those who found and monitored nests gathering vital data. They include:

In Norfolk/Suffolk, Mat Shore, Nick Moran and their team of volunteer observers.

In Essex, Stuart Brooker,

In Kent, Stephen Message, Matt Kirk

In Surrey, Susy Jones, Paul Cox

In Sussex, Richard Black, Graham Bishop, Matt Kirk, Mark Mallalieu, Matt Phelps,

In the New Forest, Rob Clements, Simon Currie, Tara Dempsey, Geoff Dicker, Nigel Matthews, Mark Swan,

In Somerset, Gus Robin, Brian Hill, Penny Willis, Jennifer Earl,

In Devon, Malcolm Burgess, Ed Horncastle, Gus Robin, Albert Knott,

Thanks also to all the observers who sent photographs



Male LSW in Worcestershire in April by Craig Round

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