Lesser Spotted Woodpecker Newsletter March 2021

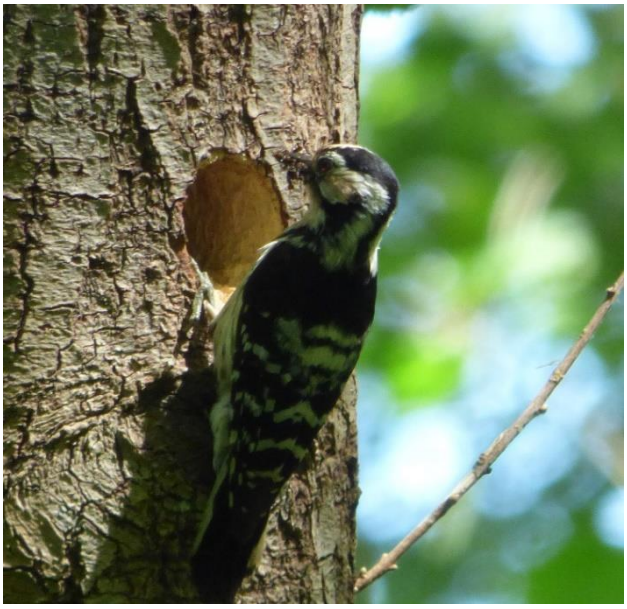

Photo 1 Female Lesser Spot bringing food to a nest in May, photo by Stephen Message.

We hope everyone has managed to stay safe over the last year. It has been challenging for us all but we have made some progress with Lesser Spotted Woodpeckers in spite of the restrictions on all our activities. We are sure we are not alone in thinking that it has been a joy to be able to continue our work on birds and other wildlife even if we have been largely restricted to our local patch.

The lockdowns in 2020 were lifted for most of us in May – just in time for volunteers to get out and find LSW nests with young. A total of 13 nests were reported to us in 2020 most being found during chick rearing: Hampshire (8), Kent (2), East Sussex (1), Norfolk (2).

The mean number of chicks fledged was 1.7 which was definitely on the low side compared with recent years. Perhaps this is not surprising. 2020 was one of the warmest springs on record and even species like Blue Tits have been reported to have missed the peak of defoliating caterpillars and had low breeding success.

A nest in Hampshire away from the New Forest was predated by a Great Spotted Woodpecker at the chick stage. It was in a very small dead birch stem – the same stem had been used for a successful nest in 2019 (see photos).

Some young fledged successfully from all the other nests, see photos overleaf.

Photo 2 Predated LSW nest in a small birch (top hole), Ken is pointing out how the Great Spot made a new opening lower down, to drag out the chicks. Photo Linda Smith

There was drama at one nest in a large garden in Kent when the adult male was killed by a neighbour's cat whilst foraging near the ground. Fortunately, the female was still around and continued feeding the young which fledged successfully.

In addition to the nests found with eggs and young there were reports involving competition and loss of cavity early in the season. A Lesser Spot cavity was found in Staffordshire which had already been predated by a Great Spot. In Sherwood Forest two Lesser Spot pairs lost their nest cavities, the first to Blue Tits and the other to a Wren! Although it is tricky to detect, we are finding that competition for nest cavities can be common. We presume the Lesser Spotted Woodpeckers go on the make a new cavity but such competition may interfere with their timing of breeding.

Aims for 2021 - We hope you are still able to help with LSW studies this year. We are planning to continue in 2021 – we have learned a great deal over the last few years but there is still more to learn and most importantly what we can do to help the species.
If anyone knows of any more Lesser Spot nests please send the details to contribute to the project to Ken and Linda Smith via the Woodpecker Network website, www.woodpecker-network.org.uk .

Photo 3 Lesser Spot chicks from three nests in the New Forest looking snug in the nest cavities. Left: the red on the head shows one male and one female chick, nearly ready to fledge. Centre: three well grown chicks. Right: one chick remaining in the nest, by the quantity of droppings in the cavity we think one or more chicks had already fledged. Photos taken with the nest inspection camera by Ken and Linda Smith

Publication of the results from Lesser Spot Network

Our paper on long-term trends in the productivity of Lesser Spotted Woodpeckers was published in Bird Study in April (Smith & Smith 2020). This analysis would not have been possible without all the data collected by the woodpecker-network volunteers over the last five years. The paper used all the nest record data for Lesser Spots held by the BTO – there were a total of 335 nests with the first recorded in 1949 and, of these, 63 came from woodpecker-network in the five years up to 2019. The take home message is that the numbers of young produced per nest has declined over the period. In addition, late season nests are now much less productive than early ones. The numbers of eggs laid and the survival of the nests has not changed so the big change is the loss of young in the nests. We think this is down to food provisioning of the chicks. You can find a copy of the full paper on our website.

Interestingly Lesser Spotted Woodpeckers nest later than Great Spots and have always done so. A recent paper by Tomasz Weslowski and colleagues (Wesołowski *et al*. 2020) has shown this is also the case in primeval Białowieża Forest in Poland so it is something fundamental about the ecology of the species. We are working with the conservation science team at the RSPB to look at early season diet. This includes both invertebrates in small diameter dead wood but also the micro-moth *Argyresthia goedartella* whose larvae live in the catkins of birch and alder. Lesser Spotted Woodpecker studies in Sweden showed this was a key early season prey item (Olsson *et al.* 2001) so we have been working on ways to monitor the numbers of larvae. Our first results are very hopeful – it seems that early season checks for small emergence holes in birch catkins will be a simple monitoring method. We have collected more samples in 2021 and will report on these next year.

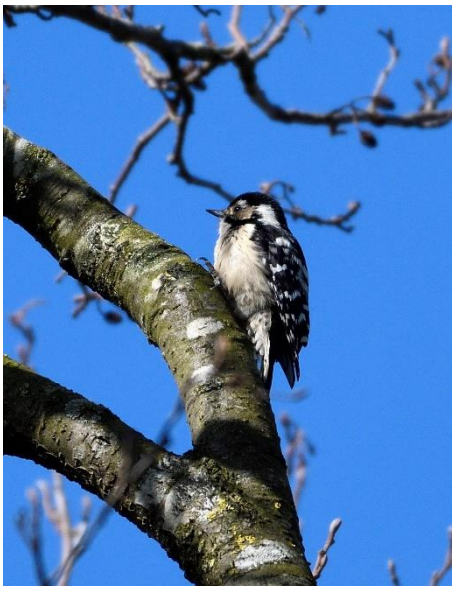

Photo 4 Female LSW in Cheshire in April. Photo by John Gilbody.

Acknowledgements

Huge thanks to all the volunteers who contributed sightings of Lesser Spots and information about breeding locations. Special thanks to those of you who found and recorded nests and allowed us to visit with the nest inspection camera. To all the volunteers who searched in vain for those elusive Lessers last year, please try again in 2021.

References

Smith, K.W. & Smith, L. (2020). Long-term trends in the nest survival and productivity of the Lesser Spotted Woodpecker Dryobates minor in Britain. *Bird Study* **67**: 109-118.

Olsson, O., Wiktander, U., Malmqvist, A & Nilsson. S.G. (2001). Variability of patch type preferences in relation to resource availability and breeding success in a bird. *Oecologia* **127**: 435-443.

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