

Focus on the Great Spotted Woodpecker

Surprisingly not that “great” but only about the size of a Starling, this exciting bird is now a fairly frequent garden visitor. Vivid black and white patterning and the flash of the unique bright red “underpants” are unmistakable as it scuttles around a feeder with astonishing speed and agility.

Great Spotted Woodpecker juveniles have red foreheads which are replaced by black as they moult in autumn. Adult males then have a red nape but females have no red on their heads at all and these differences in plumage are very easy to see. Many people enjoy working out exactly which birds are coming to their garden to feed. In summer they may find, for example, that only one adult appears in the garden with one or two juveniles.

It is something of a surprise that birds so superbly equipped to chisel holes in trees and find insect grubs should bother to come to feed on things like peanut kernels, fat bars and even kitchen scraps. However the food value of these items, in relation to the time needed to process them, probably compares very favourably with natural foods. Great Spotted Woodpeckers must constantly search for trees with dead wood in which their natural food can be found. Some have been shown to travel four or five kilometres from the core of their territory to find good trees, but even then the resources are limited whereas your peanuts are likely to be miraculously renewed! It's possible to attract the birds by erecting a log by the bird table, drilling holes and smearing fat and other foods into them. This is not absolutely necessary (although it's fun!) for the birds are really attracted to proprietary fat bars.

There are only two black and white woodpeckers breeding in Britain (none in Ireland) but the identification problems on the Continent are quite tricky with four or five different species in some areas. In Britain the Lesser Spotted Woodpecker has red on the crown as a juvenile or adult male but NEVER red trousers. It is also very small, barely bigger than a Greenfinch or House Sparrow, and hardly ever visits bird tables. Indeed in many areas with large trees, it seldom descends lower than 30 feet as it finds all its food in the tree tops and drinks from the water which accumulates in holes.

Woodpeckers have all sorts of calls and the loud squawk they give as a contact call, or alarm, is pretty easy to remember. However the drumming from late January through to May is the real give-away. The much bigger Green Woodpecker also drums, but infrequently, and more slowly than the Great Spotted. They carefully choose a resonating branch — long-distance communication is what it's all about!

There are probably some 25,000 to 30,000 pairs of these striking birds breeding in Britain. Curiously, none breed in Ireland, the Isle of Man or the Scottish islands. They do need woodland but that does not mean they will not visit isolated groups of trees, even single ones, if they have nice dead wood on them with lots of grubs. The population was at a low level during the 1960s, probably as a result of the cold weather in 1962/63. However it built up during the latter part of the decade and the birds probably benefited from the dead wood provided by Dutch Elm Disease. They are doing well now but the same cannot be said of the Lesser Spotted Woodpecker whose population seems to be steadily declining. *Chris Mead*



Great Spotted Woodpecker photograph by Tommy Holden © BTO

Great Spotted Woodpecker Fascinating Facts

The Last Page

On the last page of my dictionary, zygodactyl means “two toes pointing forwards and two backwards”. It is much easier for the zygodactyl woodpeckers to balance, when clinging to a vertical tree, with two toes beneath them rather than only one as most birds have. One day I shall manage to make this word at Scrabble!

Coiled Tongues

Woodpeckers hammer into wood to get at grubs and apart for the obvious chisel-shaped beak they have another anatomical adaptation to help them feed. The roots of their tongues are coiled round the back of their skulls and can be extended a prodigious distance to harpoon insect larvae in their tunnels. The Great Spotted's tongue protrudes 40 mm beyond the tip of the bill, my equivalent tongue would be 14 inches long!

Headaches?

Hitting a solid tree with your beak so hard that the splinters fly ought to cause the brain to rotate in the way that causes concussion in Man. Not a bit of it. The evolution of the bird's drilling equipment has provided very sophisticated shock absorbing adaptations involving the way that the bird's beak joins the skull. The stresses are transmitted directly towards the centre of the brain and do not cause the knock-out swirl.