

Birdlife in Your Garden

The Green Woodpecker is not a frequent visitor to Shropshire gardens but it will occasionally put in an appearance if conditions suit it. If you have surprised a ground-feeding greenish bird from a secluded area of lawn and it has flown off uttering a shrill, yelping laugh and displaying a yellow rump, you are one of the lucky ones. This species behaves quite differently from the Great Spotted Woodpecker, which was covered in an earlier column. Firstly, (as you might guess from the name) it is primarily green rather than black and white. Secondly, it spends much of its time feeding from the ground rather than chiseling invertebrates from tree branches and trunks. Thirdly, it only rarely 'drums' but announces its possession of territory with a loud laughing song which has led to the local name of 'Yaffle' (although 'Yawkle' and 'Yarkle' are also known in nineteenth century Shropshire accounts).



The colourful plumage of the Green Woodpecker has led to many homeowners reporting exotic tropical birds in their gardens. (Photo: Darren Frost, BTO Library).

The Green Woodpecker's diet is dominated by ants, which accounts for its ground-based feeding behaviour. It does not visit bird tables and hanging feeders like the Great Spotted Woodpecker, but may take fat, fruit and mealworms provided on the ground. Short grass is preferred foraging habitat as such areas have warm soils which favour ant nests: this includes pastures grazed by sheep and rabbits, golf courses, airfields and gardens with mown lawns. Indeed, farmland declines were noted following the outbreak of myxomatosis, which led to a drop in the rabbit population and the reversion of rabbit-grazed turf to a rougher state which is not optimal for ant colonies. They also hunt for the larvae and adults of beetles and other insects in rotten wood and probe windfall apples in orchards, the latter behaviour perhaps behind the depiction of a cartoon of the bird on the label of Bulmer's cider.

Its skill in acquiring ant prey is due largely to its 10cm long, flexible tongue, which is stored curled up in its skull. The tongue has a wide, flattened tip covered in barbs and sticky saliva produced in modified salivary glands. This is used to probe ant nests and to harvest adult insects as well as larvae and eggs. This species is capable of thriving in a range of more open habitats than other woodpeckers, as long as there are scattered trees nearby for nest sites, which are generally holes in easily-worked decayed timber, and



Blankets of snow and frozen soil make winter a hazardous time for feeding Green Woodpeckers, often leading to population declines. (Photo: John Flowerday, BTO Library)

short grass for feeding. Not for the Green Woodpecker is the pine meatier than the sward. (Sorry – I couldn't resist!)

This woodpecker is a rather spectacular bird, about the size of a Collared Dove, with dark green wings and upper back, a yellow-green rump, a bright red cap and nape, a black mask around its white eyes and a 'moustache' (black in the female and black with a red centre in the male). Juvenile birds are patterned rather like the adults but are spotted overall. Green Woodpeckers have a strongly undulating flight, as they fold their wings completely between bursts of flapping, losing height as they do so.

The species figures large in British folklore. The seventeenth century English antiquarian, John Aubrey, reported that it was used in druidic practice for augury and that "the country people do divine of raine by their cry", a belief apparently maintained until the nineteenth century and probably beyond. For this reason, the name 'Rain Fowl' is used in some Shropshire accounts in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

The species is resident in Britain and widely distributed in all locations except the north and west of Scotland. It is absent from the Isle of Man and Ireland, however. It is increasing in numbers but is subject to year-to-year population variations, especially declines in numbers as a result of cold winters, when frozen ground limits access to ants.

Unfortunately, there is not much you can do to attract the beautiful Green Woodpecker into your garden short of maintaining a bit of secluded lawn and adopting a relaxed attitude to ant nests. If you do get a visit, fat, fruit and mealworms sprinkled on the grass where you saw the bird might encourage its return.

John Arnfield

The author is British Trust for Ornithology Ambassador for the Garden BirdWatch (GBW) scheme in southern Shropshire and is available to speak to local organisations on GBW, as well as answering questions on garden birds and feeding. South-central Shropshire needs more GBW observers. Please contact John on (01694) 724 170 or at arnfield.2@osu.edu to give it a go!