

Laughing bird: Green Woodpecker



Juvenile Green Woodpecker, by Jill Pakenham

A number of different ant species are targeted by foraging Green Woodpeckers. In many parts of Britain it is the nests of the Yellow Meadow Ant *Lasius flavus* that are raided.



If you have a lawn then one of the most welcome visitors to your garden might well be the Green Woodpecker. Admittedly, you have to live in the right part of Britain. The species is less common in the north and west, and is absent altogether from much of Scotland and all of Ireland. Unlike our other woodpeckers, this larger and more impressive bird spends a lot of time on the ground, where it hunts for ants over short grassy swards.

A BIRD OF CHARACTER

With its bright green plumage and yellow rump the Green Woodpecker is a striking bird that rather stands out from the crowd.

Perhaps because of this, it features prominently in folklore and has many local names. Some of these names are linked to the loud laughing call – for example: Laughing Betsey, Yockel and Yappingale. The most widely used of these names is Yaffle, a word

that was in widespread use by the end of the 18th Century. The word ‘yaffle’ also came to be used as a verb, meaning ‘to make a sound like a woodpecker.’

Other local names link the bird with water, typically in the form of rain. These include: Rain-fowl, Weather Cock and Rainpie. Water is often prominent in the legends and folklore associated with the Green Woodpecker. John Aubrey, a 16th Century English antiquarian, noted that the bird was used by the druids for divination and stated that ‘*to this day the country people do divine of raine by their cry*’.

ANT – ANTICS

Ants dominate the Green Woodpecker’s diet, making this the most specialised of our woodpeckers. The tongue is extremely long and is coated with a sticky secretion produced by enlarged salivary glands. Both of these features, coupled with the broadened tip to the tongue, aid the woodpecker as it probes into ant nests to take adult ants and their larvae. Unlike those woodpeckers that feed predominantly on dead wood-living invertebrates, the Green

Woodpecker lacks tongue barbs and, additionally, has a relatively weak beak. The weak beak may be one reason why it rarely drums on trees, preferring to advertise its presence through vocalisations.

Many ant nests are located just below the soil surface in areas with only a short sward structure, the warmth reaching the nest from the sun being particularly important for colony development. Ants like the Yellow Meadow Ant are, therefore, sensitive to shading and to agricultural disturbance. This may be a reason why the woodpeckers favour areas of unimproved grassland, sheep-grazed pasture and garden lawns, all of which support good densities of active ant colonies.

The Green Woodpecker does not have it all its own way when feeding on ants. More often than not a feeding bout will be broken off because of the vigorous response of the ants.

WEDDED BLISS

Although normally solitary outside of the breeding season, the strong attachment to a particular breeding territory appears to deliver a monogamous pair bond that may extend over several years. The two members of the pair sometimes roost near to each other during the winter months but it is not until March that the pair bond is re-established through the use of the loud, advertising calls. A period of courtship then follows and may see the birds visiting prospective nest holes and indulging in displays of appeasement. One of these involves the birds swaying the head through a circular motion while holding an upright posture.

Activity quietens once a nest-hole is chosen and enlarged, not picking up again until there are growing young with hungry mouths to feed. It is when the young leave the nest that they may be brought to garden lawns to feed, affording you the opportunity to brush up on your identification skills. Young Green Woodpeckers are streaky in appearance (see main photograph and text on separating males and females).

Green Woodpecker populations have increased since 1966, when BTO first began to monitor them, and there was an initial period of range expansion across parts of Scotland during the early 1970s, and again in the late 1980s. More recently, however, the breeding range has contracted somewhat, with the loss of birds from parts of Wales giving particular cause of concern. Bird Atlas 2007–11 will reveal more detail on how the laughing bird is doing. ■



▲ Although male (left) and female (above) Green Woodpeckers look similar, an adult male will have a lot of red in the moustachial stripe, while in an adult female it is black. Young males have a reduced amount of red feathering but still more than seen in a female.

FACTBOX: Green Woodpecker *Picus viridis*

Population:

Breeding: 24,000 pairs

Winter: currently unknown

Conservation status: AMBER

Diet: Mostly ants taken from nests in short turf. Largely feeds on the ground.

Longevity:

Typical lifespan: Not known

Max recorded lifespan: 15 years, 0 months and 8 days

Breeding Ecology:

Clutch size: 4–6 (range 2–7) eggs

Number of broods: 1

Incubation: 19–20 days

Young in nest: 21–24 days

Age at first breeding: 1 year



Green Woodpecker egg, by Mike Toms

www.bto.org/birdfacts