

The woodpecker you are most likely to see in a Shropshire garden is the Great Spotted Woodpecker. This is a medium-sized bird (about the size of a Starling) with boldly-marked plumage giving an overall black-and-white appearance. A black back contrasts with distinctive white shoulder patches and the area under the tail is red (deeper coloured in adults). Males have a black cap with a red patch on the back of the head, females have an all black cap and juveniles have a red one. They fly strongly with shallow undulations and, when perched, are seen more often on a tree trunk than a branch. The commonest vocal sound made is a loud “tchick”, sometimes repeated.

However, woodpeckers are more likely to be detected by ear as a result of their distinctive ‘drumming’, heard most often between March and May. This is a territorial behaviour which is functionally akin to the mellifluous song of the Blackbird. Its purpose is to broadcast to other



*Note the strong feet, splayed toes and short, stiff tail, perfect features for perching on tree trunks. This ‘Great Spot’ is an adult male, shown by the red patch on the back of his head. (Photo: Jill Pakenham, BTO Library).*

Great Spotted Woodpeckers that the drumming bird is laying claim to its piece of the landscape, that other males should stay away and that any females around are welcome. When a suitable tree is found, drumming can be very loud and carry a great distance. Indeed, any object that produces a resonant sound may be used, including fence posts and telegraph poles, metal towers, weather vanes, roof flashing and ceramic insulators.

Great Spotted Woodpeckers are elegantly adapted to a life of perching vertically and rapping on wood. Their feet are strong, with well-developed splayed toes, and their short, stiff tail acts as a prop when they are on a tree trunk. The beak is heavy and a pad of absorbent tissue buffers the impact of the blows on the skull, which has a spongy lining to protect the bird’s brain. Small muscles in the head act as shock absorbers and powerful neck muscles provide the motive power for the drumming display. It has been found, however, that a woodpecker’s beak impacts need not be as hard as might be thought. They exploit the resonating properties of wood by striking it at its natural frequency of between 10-40 strikes per second.

‘Great Spots’ feed on insects and larvae by working the surface of a tree trunk, tapping it with their bills (but much more quietly than when drumming) and listening for sounds within. Delicacies may be extracted with the lengthy, sticky-ended tongue, which is four times as long as the bill and is stored coiled in the back of the skull. They are also adept at taking both the eggs and young of other birds (such as Blue Tits and House Martins) and may enlarge the entrance hole of a nestbox, or drill in from the side, to gain access. In winter, their diet may include

seeds, nuts and berries. Seeds and cones may be wedged in a suitable ‘anvil’ site in tree bark to gain access to the edible parts through repeated blows with the bill. They also visit garden feeding stations, and, following fledging, adult birds may bring their young to your garden to exploit the food you have on offer. Later, family groups break up and the young move away.

The nest of a Great Spotted Woodpecker is a hole chiselled into the trunk of a tree, about 15-30 cm deep, with a few wood chips at its base. Both adults, which pair for a single season, incubate the eggs and feed the young. Males tend to maintain the same territory and may return to nest in the same tree (though not the same hole) year after year.

Look out for Great Spotted Woodpeckers in your garden. They are quite common (though thinly spread) and are increasing, perhaps in part due to Dutch Elm disease which has increased both feeding and nesting sites. You can encourage visits by this glorious bird by offering peanuts, but avoid using the plastic mesh bags in which these are often sold as these can cause injury to birds using them. Suet in all forms can also be very welcome over the winter.

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*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. If you are interested in joining GBW, why not request a postcard from John that can be returned to the BTO for more information and a free book? Contact information: 724170 or [arnfield.2@osu](mailto:arnfield.2@osu).*



*A juvenile bird accompanies Dad to the peanut feeder. The youngster can be identified by its red cap and the paler, salmon-coloured plumage below the tail. (Photo: Jill Pakenham, BTO Library)*