

IDENTIFICATION : Woodpeckers

With only three species of woodpecker regularly breeding in Britain, identifying them should not pose too much of a problem and this is pretty much the case with the adult birds. However, the youngsters can prove to be a little trickier and learning to distinguish sex- and age-related plumages is useful.

All three species can be found in gardens, with the two black and white woodpeckers coming to feed on fats and peanuts, and the Green Woodpecker coming to feed on ants and windfall apples. One other woodpecker, the Wryneck, used to breed here but is now a rare passage visitor during migration in spring or, more likely, autumn. Wrynecks are very occasionally reported from gardens, typically when seen feeding on ants on a formal lawn. Most woodpeckers don't move far, so it is exceptionally unlikely that one of the other European species would ever make it to our shores.

Great Spotted Woodpecker *Dendrocopos major*

This is the most widespread and commonly encountered of the two 'black and white' woodpeckers, being found from the south coast of England to southern Scotland. It has recently colonised parts of Ireland. **Starling-sized.** Flies with a deep undulating action. White shoulder patch in all ages. **Call** - an often repeated 'kek', although can be uttered singly. Drums on wood during spring, the drum-rolls normally delivered in under a second, with the individual strikes being fast and very difficult to separate.

Adult male (left): Black wings, barred with white; black tail, edged with white spots. Off-white underparts, white face and crimson undertail. Red patch on nape.



Black cap with red rectangle on nape.

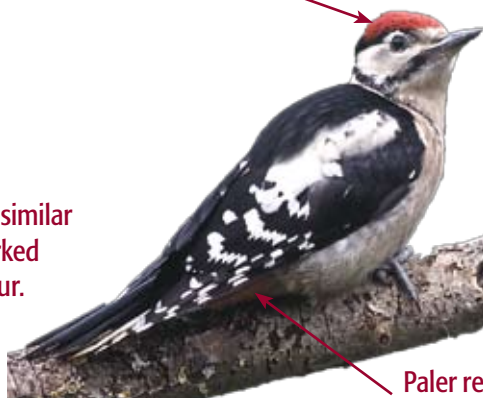
No red on head. Black cap continues down nape.

Adult female (right): Black wings, barred with white; black tail, edged with white spots. Off-white underparts, white face and crimson undertail. Black nape.



Bright crimson undertail.

Red cap



Paler red undertail.

Bright crimson undertail.

Juvenile (right): Body plumage similar to adult but with less strongly marked facial pattern, paler undertail colour. Has bright red cap, which may lead to confusion with the much smaller Lesser Spotted Woodpecker.

Images by Mark R Taylor, John Flowerday and Jill Pakenham

Next issue: Pigeons

Lesser Spotted Woodpecker *Dendrocopos minor*

Increasingly uncommon, having undergone a decline of 73% over the last 25 years. In all plumages Lesser Spotted Woodpecker is told from Great Spotted Woodpecker by the lack of a large white shoulder patch.

Black wings are barred white, and underparts are lightly streaked and lacking any red under the tail. Adults males (right) show red crown; adult females and juveniles show a black crown. **Similar in size to a House Sparrow.** Flight similar to Great Spotted though with shallower and shorter undulations.

Call - gentle 'kek', similar to Great Spotted Woodpecker though less strident. Also a far carrying series of 8–15 fairly high-pitched 'pi-pi-pi-pi-pi' notes. Drums in spring; a slower, weaker and longer-lasting affair than that of Great Spotted Woodpecker.



Barred wings

White undertail



Take advantage of opportunities where more than one woodpecker is present to refine your skills. Here an adult male Great Spotted Woodpecker (right) is interacting with a juvenile Great Spotted Woodpecker (left), presumably one of its own youngsters.

Green Woodpecker *Picus viridis*

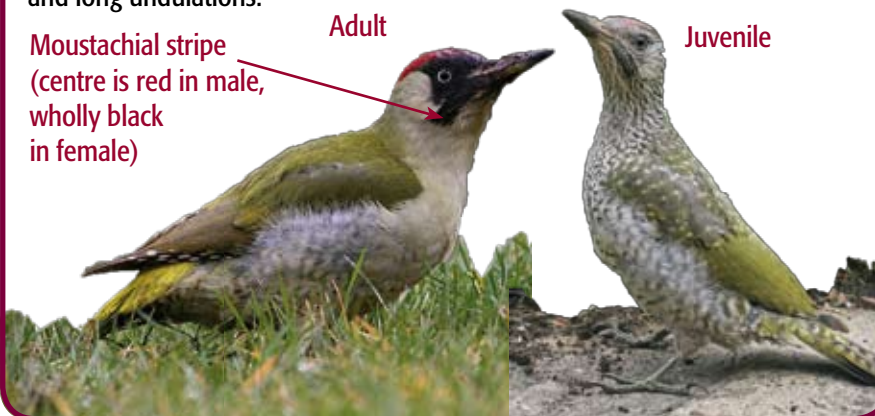
The largest of our woodpeckers should be unmistakable – the yellow and green plumage is very different to that of the spotted woodpeckers. Young birds are duller in appearance and heavily marked with streaks. The difference between male and female birds is subtle. In males, the centre of the black moustachial stripe is red, while in females it is wholly black.

Call – a repeated liquid 'kuk-kuk-kuk', which becomes a liquid laughing yaffle when used as song. Drums very rarely and when it does, the sound is soft and much longer in duration than in our other species. Flight involves deep and long undulations.

Moustachial stripe (centre is red in male, wholly black in female)

Adult

Juvenile



TEST YOUR SKILLS

Try to work out the sex and age of these woodpeckers (answers on Page 22).



By Paul Stancliffe
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