

The Great Spotted Woodpecker



Looking out for birds

People are usually very excited when they see a Great Spotted Woodpecker in their garden. After all, it is a very distinctive and conspicuous bird. There are two black and white woodpeckers to be found in the UK, the common Great Spotted Woodpecker which is Starling sized, and the smaller, Sparrow-sized, Lesser Spotted Woodpecker. The latter is now becoming an uncommon species and is sometimes difficult to find because it prefers to feed amongst smaller branches at the top of trees.

The male and female Great Spotted Woodpecker both have the same pied plumage and area of red underneath the tail but only the male has a red patch on its nape. Juveniles are also black and white but are not as well marked as adults and they have a small red cap. If you see the woodpecker in flight you will observe that it flies with an undulating manner. Sometimes you will hear it before you see it as its call is a strident 'kek' sound.

Primarily a woodland bird, it is found mainly in rural areas and broadleaf woodland. It may also be found in towns, especially large gardens and parkland. Amongst trees, you may see it crawl up and around the trunks as it searches for its main diet of insects and grubs under bark or dead wood. It will also take the eggs and chicks of smaller species of birds. Members of the Tit family and other hole-nesting birds are particularly vulnerable to attack by the Great Spotted Woodpecker. It is not unknown for them to break in to nest boxes to get at the occupants. To deter them from doing this, it is best to fit a metal plate around the hole to prevent the bird from making the hole larger. However, if determined, they can still get in by hammering in to the side of the nest box.

People often wonder how a woodpecker can hammer away on trees without suffering from concussion. The Great Spotted Woodpecker can drill about 10-40 strikes per second. The anatomy of the skull is most interesting and to withstand the constant hammering, the base of the skull is made up of shock absorbent tissue. Another interesting feature is that, as with many other members of the woodpecker family, they have very long sticky tongues which enable them to reach out for hidden grubs. The Great Spotted Woodpecker's tongue can extend to 40mm beyond the tip of the bill. So how do they store their tongues when not in use? This is done by coiling their tongue round the back of the skull.



If you hang out feeders containing peanuts, sunflower seeds and fat you may be fortunate enough to see this interesting bird in your garden and sometimes, they may be accompanied by their young. Try to work out the differences between them.

Jean Parrott

Jean is a voluntary British Trust for Ornithology (BTO) Garden BirdWatch Ambassador for Nott's. If you would like to help the BTO by recording birds and other wildlife which visit your garden, please contact Jean at jpbirds@talktalk.net Jean is also able to arrange talks to groups.

Great Spotted Woodpecker ©Jean Parrott