

# Woodpeckers of Herefordshire Progress Report.

May 2011



Looking for woodpeckers at Moccas Park National Nature Reserve



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## **INTRODUCTION**

The Woodpeckers of Herefordshire project has been running for two full seasons and seems to be going from strength to strength. A good number of volunteers have signed up which offers more eyes to the binoculars in search of the woodpeckers and an increased survey effort.

A major positive development to the Woodpeckers of Herefordshire project is the very welcome employment of Jane Sedgeley for three days per week – this was made possible from the sponsorship (£5,000) made available to the project by Heineken UK. Jane is responsible for assisting Nicky with the overall co-ordination of the project as well as monitoring a couple of sites and working alongside the project volunteers. Jane's contract duration is for 15 weeks, terminating after the key breeding season on 8<sup>th</sup> June 2011. Jane has been an enormous benefit to the project and her field skills have demonstrated that even though locating lesser spotted woodpeckers is very difficult, she has smiled and persevered with fantastic results.

More great news for the project is that Rebecca Baker (project officer 2010) will be volunteering with the project from mid June onwards.

Outcomes of the project will be included in this project but there have been some significant observations that will be discussed in more detail in the "Findings to date" section (page 8).

## **PROJECT PROMOTION**

### **Publicity**

We continue to publicise the project to a wide audience with several aims including;

- To encourage the public to send in their woodpecker sightings for our database
- To map sightings to determine habitat preferences within Herefordshire
- To raise the profile of the green and lesser spotted woodpeckers within the county
- To undertake the project in a professional manner, based upon existing knowledge, research and landowner co-operation

### **Events**

Throughout the summer months, Woodpeckers of Herefordshire will be promoted at a several events including the Three Counties Show (which has kindly donated stall space to the project), and World Environment Day in Hereford High Town organised by Herefordshire Council. The RSPB "Date with Nature" team based at Queenswood Country Park are investigating the possibility of holding an event celebrating birds in Herefordshire with an emphasis on woodland birds including woodpeckers.

The six display boards which were used at several events in 2010 have been updated by the conservation technician within Herefordshire Council so that they are relevant and up to date. These boards will be displayed at each event along with a PVC banner and leaflets for general circulation.

### **Leaflets**

The leaflets continue to be circulated and their popularity has been demonstrated by the need to have another print re-run (with slight alterations) of 8,000. Herefordshire Nature Trust kindly offered to distribute approximately 3000 to its members as an add-in to its newsletter. Bulmers have circulated leaflets to their employees within Herefordshire.

Leaflets have also been sent to all of the Tourist Information Centres in the county and also to the Cider Museum. A number of leaflets were distributed to the National Trust visitor Centre at Croft Castle (one of our study sites). We also send leaflets on request to the public for further circulation and of course, will be distributed at the forthcoming events.

### **Website**

More information on the Woodpeckers of Herefordshire project has been added to the Hereford Biodiversity Action Plan (BAP) website as well as it having a dedicated gallery of images with brief descriptions to assist in identification of the woodpeckers. An area has also been created in the survey section of the Herefordshire Ornithological Club (HOC) website that allows site users to submit their sightings via an on-line form. It also gives background information on the birds – identification, ecology, behaviour, county status, etc. This can be found at

<http://www.herefordshirebirds.org/woodpeckersurvey.html>

All information submitted to HOC will be given to the project to be added to our dataset in order to build up a map on the woodpecker distribution within Herefordshire.

Another addition to the project is a Woodpeckers of Herefordshire Facebook page. This has been set up as a forum for volunteers to submit questions/ share their thoughts and ideas as well as use the images as an identification tool. The page is still in its infancy but it is hoped to gather momentum in coming weeks.

### **Articles**

Features written about the project have been written with particular audiences in mind and these include;

- RSPB
- A project update in the quarterly Herefordshire LBAP newsletter “Biodiversity Action”
- Bulmers have had an article for their growers newsletter on the project, its aims and objectives with an emphasis to encourage orchard owners and managers to submit their sightings as well as advice on habitat management
- RSPB have demonstrated an interest in the project and have offered to undertake some media opportunities
- E-updates have been circulated to volunteers and project partners on the progress of the project along with tips on how to locate woodpeckers and their nests

### **Exhibition**

The images taken by Evan Bowen-Jones in 2010 of woodpeckers and their associated habitats were received with great enthusiasm and so Nicky, Evan and Sarah Connelly worked together to develop the Woodpeckers of Herefordshire exhibition. Money was kindly given to the project by Herefordshire Council and this covered the printing costs of the images. A selection of images was printed on a variety of backgrounds (laminated, Foamex, canvas, etc). They were then mounted upon the walls of the Beam Press Gallery in Hereford Cider Museum (Plate 1). The exhibition was launched at the Biodiversity Partnership Annual Conference in November and the feedback was overwhelmingly positive from a wide range of partners as well as the general public and the hosts. After the exhibition had been at the Cider Museum, it moved to Westons visitor centre at Much Marcle. The venue was much smaller but even so, it received lots of encouraging comments. The

exhibition moved from Westons to the old Tourist Information Centre at Queenswood Country Park (owned and managed by Herefordshire Council) and discussions are currently in place to exhibit the pictures at Hereford Cathedral.



**Plate 1.** Exhibition at Hereford Cider Museum Photograph by Sarah Connelly

## **VOLUNTEER UPDATES**

Woodpeckers of Herefordshire has recruited some very dedicated volunteers, some carried through from last year and others new to the project this year. Our volunteers have been undertaking parish surveys, box monitoring, photographic studies and submitting general woodpecker sightings. Without their input, the project wouldn't be able to continue. Some volunteers have been very instrumental in promoting the project by distributing the leaflets. Those who have been monitoring the boxes and undertaking the parish surveys all attended the training events held at Westons Cider in April 2010 and March 2011 (see below). Regular project updates have been sent to volunteers via email. We have been informing them on project progress as well as tips to assist in undertaking surveys.

### **Training events**

Four half-day events were held in March, 2011 and attendee numbers were very encouraging. Overall, a total of 52 people attended. The first event was held at Putley village hall on Sunday 6<sup>th</sup> March. Eleven people turned up early on a Sunday morning that started with an indoor session. We then walked to a local orchard in the village centre in search of the birds. Unfortunately, we were unable to locate any woodpeckers although we did look at old nest holes and evidence of feeding, so all was not lost.

The next two sessions were held at Westons in Much Marcle on 12<sup>th</sup> March. The morning session had 20 attendees and the afternoon session had 11 attendees. We located old nest holes in the outdoor elements of the sessions as well as hearing and seeing great spotted and green Woodpeckers – unfortunately the Much Marcle lesser spotted woodpeckers evaded us – this time!

The final training session was held in Moccas village Hall on 22<sup>nd</sup> April. Attendance numbers were once again – very good (10 attendees). We held the indoor session and then trailed out to Moccas Park (thank you Tim Dixon & Lewis Goldwater) in search of woodpeckers. We heard lots of woodpecker activity (calls and drumming) although couldn't locate the lesser spotted woodpeckers.



We did spend a small amount of time looking at the green woodpecker droppings that were conveniently situated next to the pond (Plate 2).



**Plate 2.** Inspecting green woodpecker droppings at Moccas Park NNR (photograph by Danielle Newman)

### **BOX PROGRESS**

From regular visits to the boxes (March onwards), it appears a high proportion has been visited by birds at the beginning of the spring. We are confident that it is birds as evidence is pecking marks in the insulation material inside the steel reinforcement ring inside the boxes. The holes are very small (38mm) and so the bird would have to be small, especially those which have made deep excavations into the box, i.e. deeper than head and neck depth. It is possible that the excavations were made by lesser spotted woodpeckers, but there are no observations of them doing this. There are few other cavity excavating birds small enough to use the entrance holes in the boxes. Although we cannot confirm box use by lesser spotted woodpeckers, the findings do demonstrate curiosity about the boxes. A couple of boxes have been investigated by squirrels as layers of plywood has been peeled off and one box in particular had the strap lock removed from the lid of the box and left discarded on the ground. One box had fallen off the tree possibly with the help from a grey squirrel. One of the boxes in an orchard in the National Trust Brockhampton Estate was being used by nesting blue tits.

In order to monitor the woodpecker nest boxes we devised codes that would allow us to chart condition of the boxes and changes in their use over time (Table 1). Plate 3 shows a box that has been partially excavated by birds and was scored as Excavation Code 2. A total of 52 nest boxes were checked regularly. Only 3 boxes showed no sign of investigation by birds. Results are summarised in Table 2. all boxes will be closely inspected at the end of the summer and box use information will be updated Figure

**Table 1.** Codes used to characterise condition and use of the woodpecker nest boxes.

Box Condition Codes	Excavation Codes
0 = Good	0 = No excavation
1 = Structural problem (screws, roof, rotting)	1 = Minimal pecking
2 = Woodpecker/squirrel problem- excavating through box.	2 = Small hole, 2-4cm deep
3= On ground- fallen off or tree fallen down	3 = Horizontal excavation extending approximately half way back
4= Removed (stolen)	4 = Horizontal excavation extending all the way to back of box
5 = Upside down	5 = Cavity extending downwards towards bottom of box
6 = Other wildlife: wasp nest, bird nest	6 = Proper full vertical nest cavity.
	7 = Excavated all the way to the back, with the whole top portion excavated out.

**Table 2.** Results of box inspection to date

Excavation Code	Number of boxes observed in each category*
0 = No excavation	3
1 = Minimal pecking	11
2 = Small hole, 2-4cm deep	31
3 = Horizontal excavation extending approximately half way back	13
4 = Horizontal excavation extending all the way to back of box	7
5 = Cavity extending downwards towards bottom of box	2
6 = Proper full vertical nest cavity	1
7 = Excavated all the way to the back, with the whole top portion excavated out.	1

\*The total adds up to more than 52 boxes because level of excavation changes with time.



**Plate 3.** Example of a nest box that has been excavated

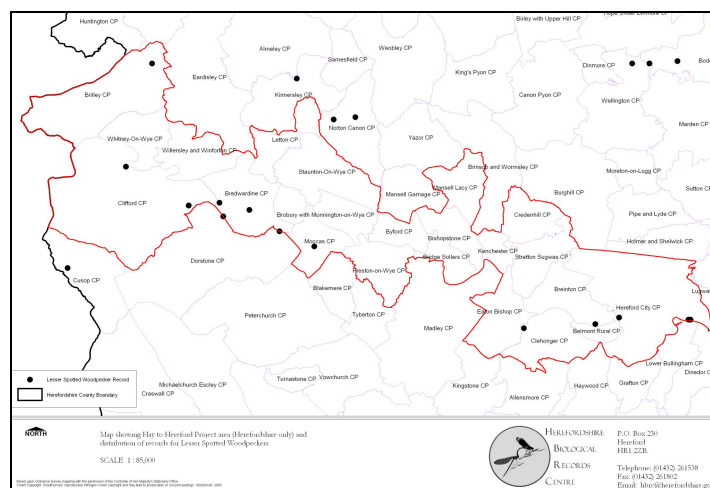
## **DATA AND MAPPING**

**Data.** The Herefordshire Biological Recording Centre (HBRC) has kindly offered their services to collate and manage the data that is generated from this project. This is a major advancement in the project and allows us to manage the data systematically and analytically. We are still receiving lots of records from the general public via the identification leaflet as well as from emails, phone calls and occasionally – HOC. HBRC have also developed a recording form for officers to use when dealing with telephone queries or emails

Discussions are in place with the British Trust for Ornithology (BTO) to do a data exchange. They are currently co-ordinating BirdTrack <http://www.bto.org/volunteer-surveys/birdtrack> which is a long-term monitoring scheme that invites people to submit their sightings records which are then entered into the database on a County by County basis. They hold information dating back to 1990 which isn't necessarily held by HOC as records are submitted from the general public.

**Mapping.** Initial mapping studies undertaken by HBRC have shown that lesser spotted woodpecker records are all in very close proximity to water (max distance 0.373km). This could suggest many things and is open to interpretation although it may suggest that there is a stronger association than previously thought, or this may be skewed due to most areas within the counties are within this proximity to watery habitats. More analysis is needed to determine this correlation.

**Hay to Hereford project (H2H).** The Woodland Trust has developed a brief landscape-scale project idea linking wildlife habitats and influencing positive land management. This project has been identified by the West Midlands Biodiversity Partnership (WMBP) as one of the eighteen priority landscape-scale projects for the West Midlands. The project boundary also encompasses a concentration of lesser spotted woodpecker records. The Woodpeckers of Herefordshire project has teamed up with the Woodland Trust to develop this project further. Financial support was gained from WMBP to undertake a community scoping exercise based upon maps created showing appropriate BAP priority habitats, and woodpecker sightings. Three meetings were held in parish halls within the defined project area and communities were briefed upon the project and asked for their ideas, suggestions and interest. Feedback was positive and steer was provided from land managers, individuals and nature conservation organisations. The next step in the development of this project is to analyse the comments and suggestions and to work closely with participants to draw together a HLF application. A separate report will be made available shortly on the outcomes and recommendations made from the meetings.



**Plate 4.** Hay to Hereford project area



## **FINDINGS TO DATE**

A number of nests have been located across the county of all three species. Great spotted woodpeckers continue to be successful in their breeding attempts – this is possibly due to them having very adaptable feeding habits and eating at garden feeding stations over the winter months to sustain their energy levels, therefore being in prime physical condition leading up to the breeding season.

A couple of lesser spotted woodpecker nests have been found on private land and so to protect the landowners identity, we will not be providing the location of these for the means of this report. One landowner has asked for habitat management advice in light of this and so hopefully the project can build upon this. Prior to the breeding season, the lesser spotted woodpeckers were very active in March and April and we received a handful of sighting records that seemed very promising. In the second half of April to present day, the birds became much more secretive and finding them became much more difficult. This was coupled with the emergence of foliage on the trees.

It appears that most lesser spotted woodpecker records are found in very close proximity to water bodies and breeding attempts have been located in several riparian habitats.

Also, Duncan Sivell from Buglife has identified invertebrate prey items on the images taken by Evan Bowen-Jones in 2010. Prey items included *Ephemera danica*, Alder sawfly, *Nuctenea umbricata* (spider), woolly aphids, slugs, and several species of lepidoptera larvae (possibly including northern winter moth). Whilst observing adult lesser spotted woodpeckers on the banks of the river Lugg in May 2011, taking food to the nest, *Ephemera danica* appeared to be a food preference. This invertebrate species is indicative of clean flowing rivers and lakes with sandy or gravel bottoms. This would further suggest that lesser spotted woodpeckers are an indicator species of a healthy environment.



Plate 5. *Ephemera danica*. An important source of food for the lesser spotted woodpecker. Photograph by Nicky Davies

Green woodpecker breeding attempts have been much more difficult to locate this year, perhaps due to the reduced number of birds. The project is monitoring a couple of nest sites in the hope that they are productive.

It appears (purely from observations) that numbers of green woodpeckers are drastically low compared to 2010 figures. It would be expected that with higher survey effort, there should be higher sightings records. This has yet to be confirmed thorough statistical analysis but if the theory does confirm it, this could be due to several reasons – the key one being that the 2010 / 2011 winter

was exceptionally cold, preventing the green woodpeckers from foraging for ants in the hard frozen soils. Also, the windfall apples (alternative winter energy source) were frozen hard, or too decomposed for consumption.

### **WORK TO DO**

- Continue to follow up reports of Lesser spotted and great spotted woodpecker sightings
- Attend events to promote project (World Environment Day, Three Counties Show, IEEM event)
- Make further links with Danny Alder (green woodpecker researcher) to link projects and improve skills on nest site locating
- Articles for Hereford Times and Hereford Matters urging public to become involved
- Undertake data transfer with BTO
- Continue to liaise with associated organisations, e.g. cider makers in the county, BTO, RSPB, BugLife
- Photographic display at Hereford Cathedral
- Produce updated distribution maps with HBRC
- Continue to collate all sightings and breeding records of woodpeckers and submit to HBRC
- Analyse habitats utilised by woodpeckers, species interactions and ecological requirements to influence the development of habitat management guidelines
- Create updated presentation on project to include findings, project involvement and bird ecological requirements
- Display project in the atrium in Plough Lane Council buildings

### **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

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