

The search for the Lesser Spotted Woodpecker! Field Meeting 26th February 2011

BRETT WESTWOOD



Lesser Spotted Woodpecker male, Wyre Forest, 1991

Rosemary Winnall

When a sizeable group of members set out from Dry Mill Lane car park on February 26 to look for Lesser Spotted Woodpeckers, there was an air of expectation, tinged with reality. These birds really are lesser spotted nowadays, having plummeted by 76% since the 1970s. The causes of their decline are complex, but may be linked to changes in the management of our woods. They're also the subject of a national study recently undertaken by the RSPB and others, for which Wyre is a key study area. Elisabeth Charman's article which accompanies the current one, sets out the aims and findings of the research in Wyre and elsewhere. So great is the decline that together with another declining Wyre bird the Willow Tit, in 2011 "lesser spots" were added to the list of birds considered by the Rare Breeding Birds Panel; a sad state of affairs for a species which used to be widespread and fairly common in Worcestershire.

In contrast with the late 1970s and 1980s, taking anyone to see the bird now is like looking for a rainbow, but we chose our time and location with care. In late February birds begin to call - a rather thin "pee-pee-pee" - and drum. Their drumming is quieter and faster than that of Great Spotted Woodpeckers and often has a purring quality. When they're not vocalising or drumming, you still have a chance of seeing one because they often associate with roving bands of tits, Nuthatches and Treecreepers.

Just twenty minutes into our walk, as we headed through Town Coppice we heard a flock of Great and Blue Tits moving through the oak canopy and almost immediately

found a male "lesser spot" working the outer branches. This was a first for some members and though views were rather distant, most people were able to see the sparrow-sized bird bounding between the oak branches displaying its white-barred, not spotted, back and its red forehead. This is a much smaller and more delicate bird than the heftier "great-spot", and can reach slender twigs that its larger relative can't. We lost it to sight as the party of foraging birds moved away through the canopy, but it was good to confirm that the birds had survived a tough winter.

Moving on to Lodge Hill Farm, another Wyre speciality, a Hawfinch, perched on the very top of an oak allowing everyone to see its massive head and bill and short tail. Up to ten birds have been feeding in the area and it is likely that these are local breeders, though continental Hawfinches do arrive in the UK each winter; how many of these reach the Wyre Forest? A Peregrine soared overhead as we stood in Lodge Hill orchard and Buzzards displayed over Withybed Wood.

After lunch we climbed above Cooper's Mill and ascended into Longdon to look up the Dowles valley for soaring raptors. After a bleak and snowy winter, when temperatures had fallen to -19°C at Lodge Hill, it was good to see a bumblebee, probably *Bombus terrestris*, foraging, and Dave Scott heard a Common Lizard rustling through the dry leaves. Later, frogs were calling in the wooded pool near Lodge Hill orchard and Denise Bingham found a newt, hidden in moss nearby.