

Lesser Spotted Woodpecker

Dendrocopos minor

Category A

Formerly bred, now a very rare
vagrant

8 records since 1985

Resident almost throughout wooded regions of Europe except Ireland and Scotland.

Henry Ulyett in his *Rambles of a Naturalist Round Folkestone* (1880) included the species in a list of those recorded in the neighbourhood of Folkestone, within a radius of six miles from the town hall. Whilst this range extends further inland than the current Folkestone and Hythe area, so is not conclusive proof of occurrence here, it does, especially when considered alongside other evidence, suggest that the species had been long-established locally up until relatively recently.

Brian Uden saw one in trees on the north side of the canal at the Dukes Head bridge in Hythe in March 1949 and Roger Norman noted the species occasionally along the Hythe Canal between Hythe and West Hythe in the late 1950s and early 1960s, whilst the owner of 'Marsh View' on Burmarsh Road, Palmarsh reported that Lesser Spotted Woodpeckers visited their garden in the 1950s.

H. M. Rowland in *Some aspects of the natural history of the Folkestone District* (1968) stated that three kinds of woodpecker "were common until the severe winter of 1963-4 when their numbers were seriously reduced," since when "they are slowly increasing now".

The *Birds of Kent* (1981) considered it to be a widely, but apparently thinly distributed species, and the least common of the three woodpeckers, though had little doubt that it was under-recorded, due to its elusive nature. It was thought likely that it is more common and widespread as a breeding species than indicated by the Breeding Bird Atlas (1967-73) and though absent from Romney Marsh, did "breed regularly in woods bordering the Royal Military Canal". A recent population increase due to Dutch elm disease was also noted.

In the 1970s D E Chittenden recorded confirmed breeding at Sandling Park in each of the three years between 1972 and 1974, which no doubt relates to its inclusion for the tetrad TR13 M in the Breeding Bird Atlas map in the *Birds of Kent*.

In the early 1980s Neil Frampton considered it to be resident in the West Hythe area, where there was at least one pair, with single birds often seen along the canal bank and in an old orchard there. He predicted however that the "removal of old and dead timber by the Council may cause the demise of this species".

Since the early 1980s however, the Lesser Spotted Woodpecker has declined significantly and very rapidly, and has disappeared from many of its former localities. It became so rare that from 2000 annual monitoring of population trends through the Common Bird Census was unable to continue, having previously indicated a 60% loss since 1968. All breeding records since 2010 need to be forwarded to the Rare Breeding Birds Panel. A similar pattern has been witnessed across Europe, where it is one of the most strongly declining bird species. The causes of decline are not yet known: a loss of open woodland, competition with Great Spotted Woodpeckers and Grey Squirrels, shortage of food, and climate change have all been suggested (as has the removal of old and dead timber locally), but there is little evidence in support of these hypotheses.

It seems very unlikely that the Lesser Spotted Woodpecker persists as a breeding species locally and there were no records in the 2008-2013 Atlas period. There have been just seven records since 1980 but the most recent two, after a gap of 15 years, are intriguing, especially as the locations of the sightings are only about 1.5 miles apart, either side of the Dibgate area.

The records by year are shown in figure 1.

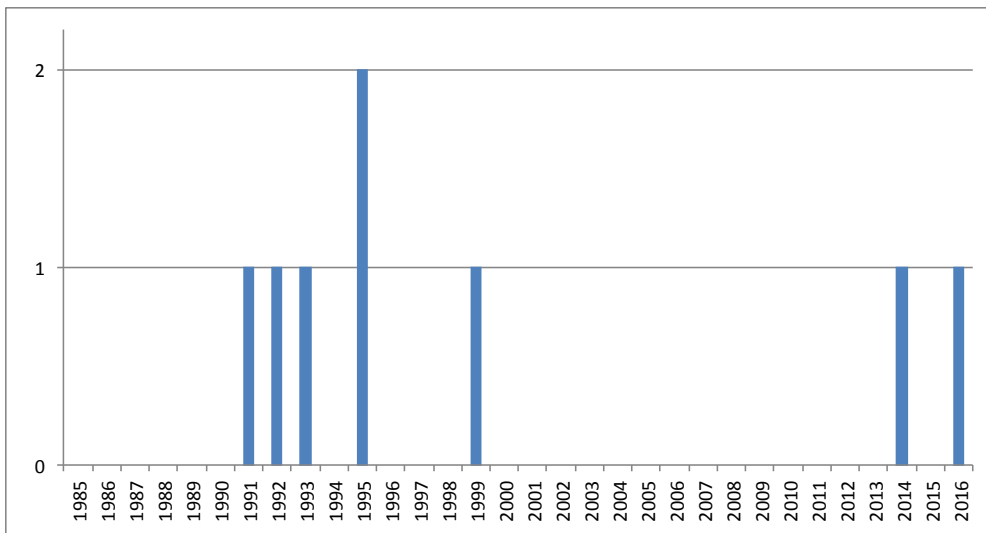


Figure 1: Lesser Spotted Woodpecker records since 1985 at Folkestone and Hythe

Modern records are quite well scattered, with two in March, and singles in February, April, May, July and December. The records by week are given in figure 2.

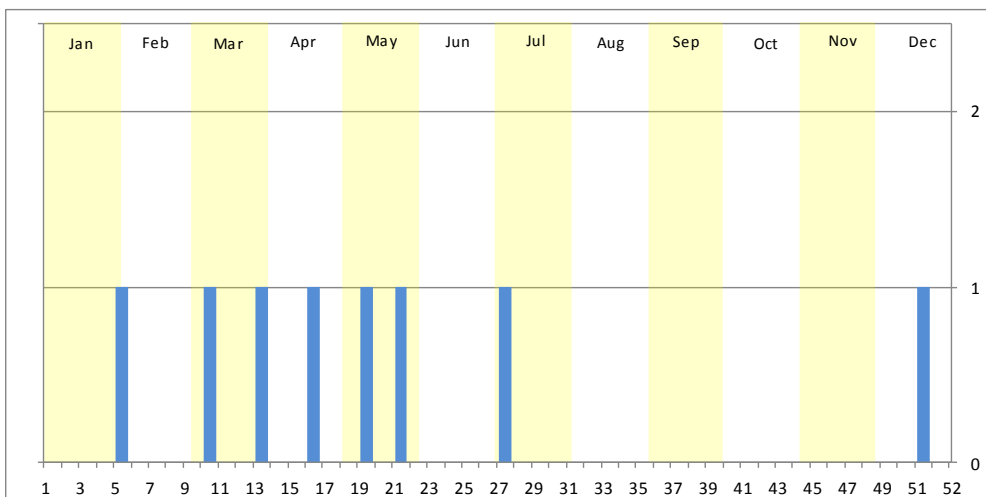


Figure 2: Lesser Spotted Woodpecker records at Folkestone and Hythe by week

Six of the records since 1985 are from the Hythe / West Hythe area, where it may have clung on as a breeding species until the mid-1990s, with the others from the Capel-le-Ferne area and most recently Cheriton and the Dibgate area.

The list of area records since 1985 is as follows:

- 1991** Nickoll's Quarry, one, disturbed from rough ground flew into gardens, 3rd February (R. K. Norman)
- 1992** Hythe Ranges, one, 20th December, (R. K. Norman)
- 1993** West Hythe, one, 31st March (R. K. Norman)
- 1995** Hythe, two, 5th March (R. K. Norman)
- 1995** West Hythe, one, 21st April (R. K. Norman)
- 1999** Capel-le-Ferne Gun Site, one, flew inland, 7th May (D. A. Gibson, I. A. Roberts)
- 2014** Cheriton, one, 2nd July (J. Tomsett)
- 2016** Near Little Dibgate Wood, one, 20th May (J. Tomsett)

The 1999 record is interesting as it appears to relate to a migrant. The only previous sighting which had indicated a migrant origin was one seen at Folkestone Warren by Peter Wells on the 9th March 1984.