

Lesser Spotted Woodpecker

Dryobates minor

Category A

Formerly bred, now a very rare
vagrant. 10 records since 1990

Resident throughout almost all wooded regions of Europe and northern Asia. In Britain it is absent from Ireland and Scotland (Snow & Perrins, 1998). In Kent it is a widely but thinly distributed declining resident, with some dispersal in autumn (KOS, 2020).

Knight & Tolputt (1871) 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.

The first documented local record involved one seen by Brian Uden in trees on the north side of the canal at the Dukes Head bridge in Hythe in March 1949, whilst Roger Norman noted the species occasionally along the Hythe Canal between West Hythe and Hythe in the late 1950s and early 1960s, and the owner of 'Marsh View' on Burmarsh Road (Palmarsh) reported that both spotted woodpecker species visited their garden in the 1950s.

Rowland (1968) writing about the "lowlands" around Folkestone ("a countryside of woods, fields and villages lying between the chalk escarpment of the Downs and the Marsh"), stated that three kinds of woodpecker "were common until the severe winter of 1963-4 when their numbers were seriously reduced" but "they are slowly increasing now".

D. E. Chittenden recorded confirmed breeding at Sandling Park in each of the three years between 1972 and 1974, which led to its inclusion in the tetrad TR13 M in the first county atlas (1967-73).

Taylor *et al* (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 first county atlas (1967-73) and though absent from Romney Marsh, did "breed regularly in woods bordering the Royal Military Canal". A population increase observed in the latter part of their review period (1952-76) was thought probably to be due to Dutch elm disease.

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 the Lesser Spotted Woodpecker has declined significantly and very rapidly, disappearing from many of its former localities across Britain. 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. The Rare Breeding Birds Panel started to collate all breeding records from 2010, with an estimated 300 territories across the country in 2017 (Holling *et al*, 2019).

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 any of these hypotheses.

In the 1990s there were records in the area to the west of Hythe in four of the five years to 1995 and it may have clung on as a breeding species here until the mid-1990s, but there have been no records from this area since.

There were no records in the 2007-2013 Atlas period and the table below shows how this compares to previous atlases (Taylor *et al* 1981, Henderson & Hodge 1998). The confirmed and probable breeding categories have been combined to account for differing definitions of these in the first atlas.

Breeding atlases	1967 - 1973		1988 - 1994		2007 - 2013	
Possible	0	(0%)	4	(13%)	0	(0%)
Probable/Confirmed	1	(3%)	3	(10%)	0	(0%)
Total	1	(3%)	7	(23%)	0	(0%)

As noted above it was present in TR13 M in the first atlas, whilst the second atlas included probable or confirmed breeding in TR13 H, TR13 M and TR13 N, with possible breeding in TR13 J, TR13 T, TR13 U and TR23 P.

The records by year since 1990 are shown in figure 1.

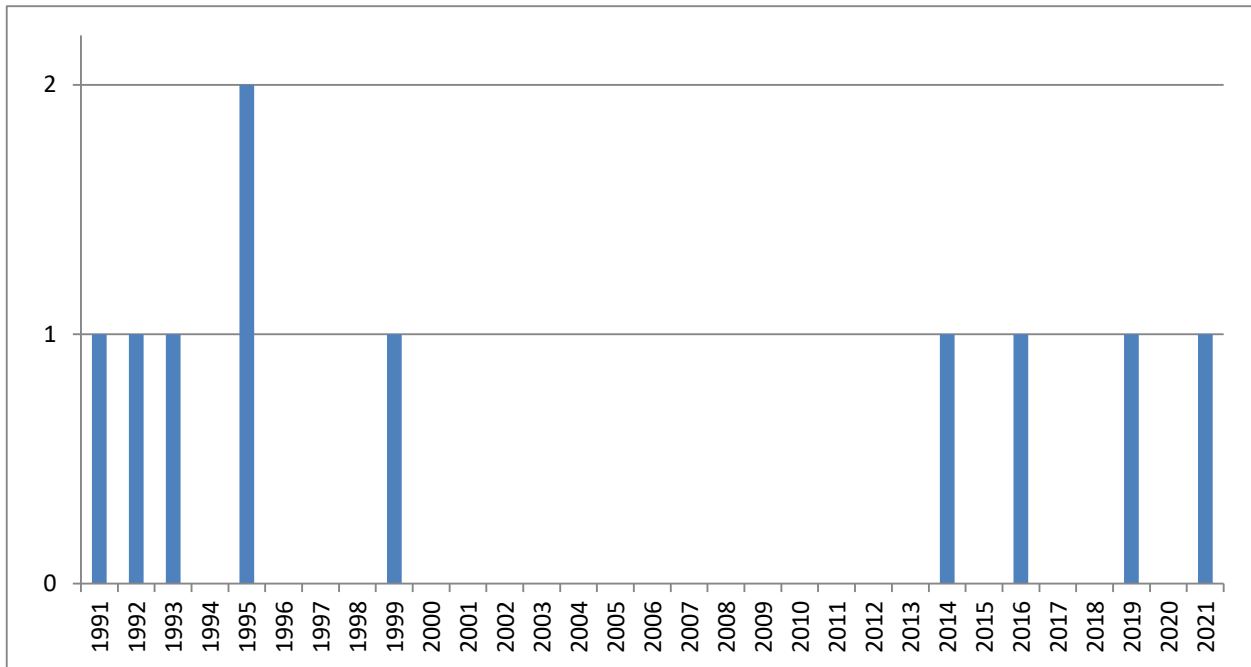


Figure 1: Lesser Spotted Woodpecker records at Folkestone and Hythe since 1990

The records since 1990 by week are given in figure 2 and figure 3 shows the distribution of all records by tetrad.

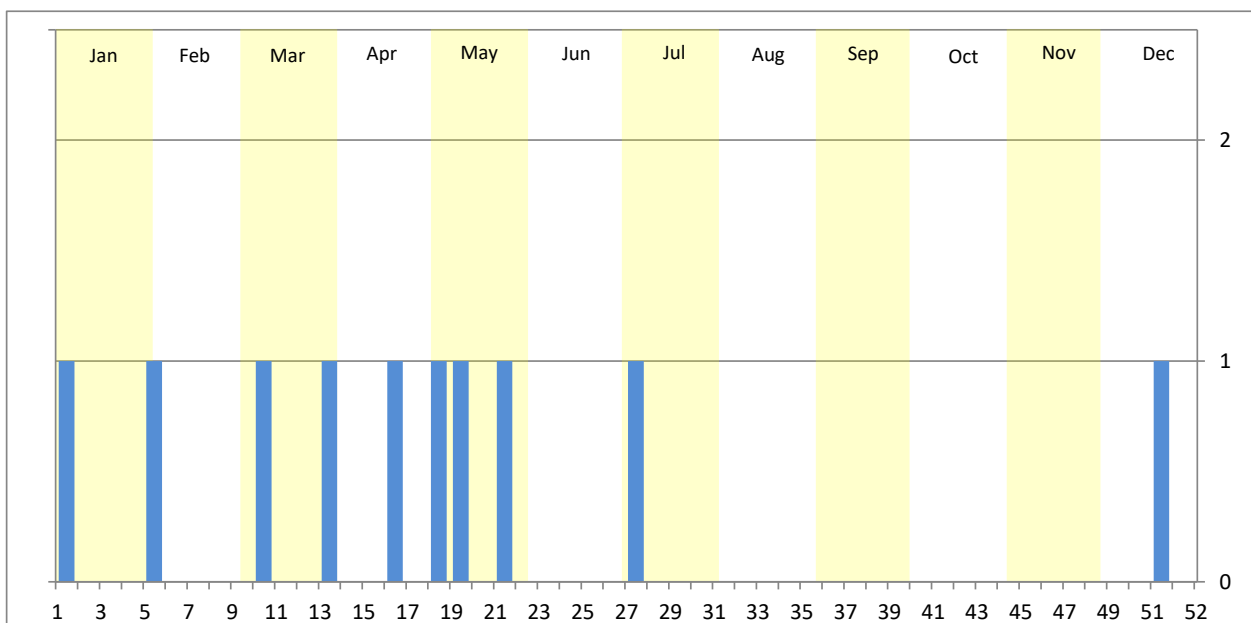


Figure 2: Lesser Spotted Woodpecker records at Folkestone and Hythe by week since 1990

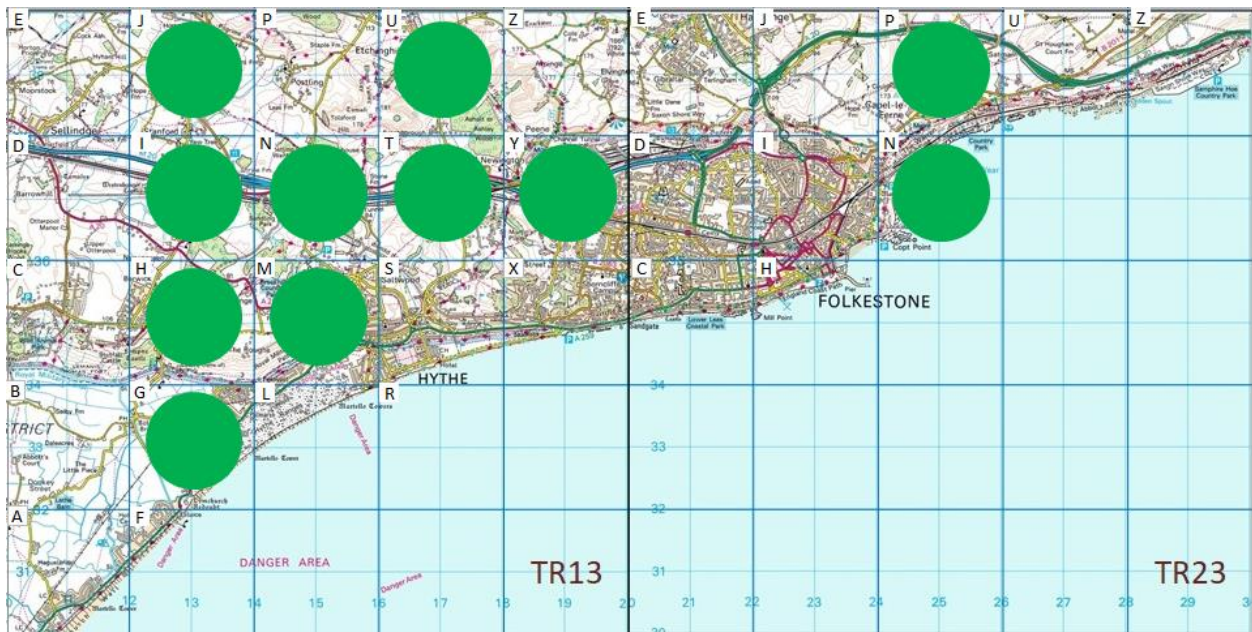


Figure 3: Distribution of all Lesser Spotted Woodpecker records at Folkestone and Hythe by tetrad

The only record in the almost 20 year period between 1996 and 2013 involved an apparent migrant seen at Capel-le-Ferne by Dale Gibson and Ian Roberts on the 7th May 1999, which flew in from the direction of the coast, landed briefly and called, then continued inland. The only previous record that had indicated a migrant origin was one seen at Folkestone Warren by Peter Wells on the 9th March 1984.

Whilst it seems very unlikely that it has persisted as a breeding bird locally there has been an intriguing series of records since 2014, with singles at Cheriton in July 2014 (TR13 Y), near Little Dibgate Wood in May 2016 and at Beachborough Lakes in January 2019 (both in TR13 T), and near Newingreen in May 2021 (TR13 I), with three of the four being seen by the same fortunate observer. The first three locations are not particularly far apart, perhaps the woods around the Seabrook Stream might just still hold this species, or maybe it is undergoing a slight recovery: Clements *et al* (2015) speculated that dieback of the European Ash may perhaps lead to a temporary resurgence in Lesser Spotted Woodpecker numbers.

The list of area records since 1990 is as follows:

- 1991** Nickolls 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)
- 2019** Beachborough Lakes, one, 7th January (S. Tomlinson)
- 2021** Newingreen (A20 Westenhanger junction), one, 5th May (J. Tomsett)

References

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Acknowledgements

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