PICUS MINOR, Linn.

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Lesser Spotted Woodpecker.

Picus minor, Linn. Syst. Nat., tom. i. p. 176.

—— *varius minor*, Briss. Orn., tom. iv. p. 41.

—— *striolatus*, Macgill. Hist. of Brit. Birds, vol. iii. p. 86.

—— *discolor minor*, Frisch, Vög., pl. 37.

Dendrocopus minor, Koch, Baier. Zool.

Picus pipra, Pall. Zoog. Ross. Asiat., tom. i. p. 414.

—— *Ledouci*, Malh. Faun. Orn. Algérie, p. 22.

Pipripicus minor, Bonap. Consp. Vol. Zyg. 1854.

Piculus pusillus, *P. hortorum*, *P. herbarum*, *P. crassirostris*, Brehm, der Vollft. Vogelf., p. 70, 1855.

THE Lesser Spotted Woodpecker is stated by some writers to be one of our rarest birds; but in this opinion I cannot coincide, for I am sure that if looked for it may be found in every English county from Cornwall to Yorkshire. North of this I admit it becomes more scarce, and beyond the Scottish border it is not to be met with; neither does it occur in Ireland. Morris, in his 'British Birds,' states that one was shot near Stromness, in Orkney, by Mr. Low in 1774, and another was observed at Sanday on the 14th of October 1823; but these were in all probability stray birds from northern Europe. This Woodpecker is so common in all suitable situations within an area of fifty miles round London, that it is quite unnecessary to name any particular places in which it may be found. In my 'Birds of Europe,' published in 1837, I stated that Kensington Gardens was one of its favourite resorts; but the vast increase in our great city, and the consequent superabundance of smoke, having rendered the fine old trees in those gardens no longer tenable by insects, the bird has deserted that locality. In Richmond and Windsor Parks, the woods of Taplow and Cliveden, and the fine elms of the playing-fields at Eton it is tolerably numerous.

The actions of the Lesser Spotted Woodpecker are restless in the extreme, for the bird is constantly flitting from branch to branch, and from tree to tree. Like the Long-tailed Tit, it appears to have a daily round, at one time traversing the great woods, at others the line of elms growing in the hedgerow. It seldom descends to the large boles, but flits from top to top with an onward movement, in the course of which a considerable distance is traversed between morning and night. This bird especially attracted my attention in the days of my boyhood; and from that period to the present time I have watched it with great interest, in order that I might become acquainted with its breeding-places and economy, respecting which so little has been recorded that I may be excused if I should be somewhat diffuse on the subject. To render credit where credit is due, I must first acknowledge my obligations to Mr. Briggs, gardener to M. de Vitre, Esq., of Formosa, near Cookham, in Berkshire, for the assistance he has rendered me in the acquisition of the knowledge I desired. During the last few years several pairs have bred in this beautiful spot, their holes being always made in the upright stems of the broken branches of the loftiest poplars, at such a height as to be all but inaccessible to any one but a sailor or an Australian "black fellow." Aware of my anxiety to become acquainted with every detail connected with the history of this species for the purposes of the present work, Briggs, at considerable risk both to body and limb, has mounted several of these mast-like stems, sawn them off, and lowered them to the ground without the least injury to the eggs or the young birds.

About the end of April 1861, a pair commenced excavating in one of the lofty poplars alluded to, at which they laboured assiduously for two or three weeks, bringing the chips, one by one, to the opening, and throwing them out in quick succession; after the work appeared to be completed, a certain time was allowed to elapse for the deposition of the eggs, when the dead branch was sawn off a few inches below where the bottom of the excavation was supposed to be. A hole, perfectly round and an inch and a half in diameter, had been made about six inches from the extremity of the branch (the upper part of which had been blown off by the wind), and was continued downward for about a foot, gradually increasing in diameter to the bottom, where it terminated in a round cavity about the size of a breakfast-cup. Unfortunately, sufficient time had not been allowed for the deposit of the full complement of eggs, three only having been laid, on a few chips of wood almost as fine as sawdust.

In the year following, the same pair of birds drilled a circular hole through the flinty bark of the same branch, and excavated down the stem to a similar depth. On sawing off the branch, on the 10th of June, four young birds, nearly ready to fly, were found in the cavity. They were very active, frequently ascending to the entrance of the hole, and uttering a loud querulous cry. These young birds were sent to the Zoological Society, but did not survive many days.

In the spring of 1863, the same pair made a hole and deposited four eggs in the dead branch of another of the Formosa poplars, at a height of fifty-five feet. These delicate flesh-coloured eggs were very beautiful, and measured three-quarters of an inch in length by half an inch in breadth.

Some persons have stated that the eggs of this bird resemble those of the Wryneck; but a comparison of blown specimens will at once show that they are very different—those of the Wryneck being of a dull opaque chalky white, while those of the Woodpecker are so transparent, that when placed on pink wool the colour is plainly visible through them; the surface, too, is glossy, and approximates in appearance to those of the Kingfisher, Roller, and Bee-eater.

The Rev. Mr. Bree states that “its loud, rapid, vibratory noise, most extraordinarily loud to be produced by so small an animal, can hardly fail to arrest the attention of the most unobserving ear. Though I have watched the bird during the operation within the distance of a few yards, I am quite at a loss to account for the manner in which the noise is produced. It resembles that made by the boring of a large auger through the hardest wood; and hence the country people sometimes call this bird the ‘pump-borer.’” Mr. Dovaston informs us that in the woods near Shrewsbury it never failed in April to astonish him “with his prodigiously loud churr on the rampikes of the trees, which, the atmosphere being favourable, may be heard more than a mile. It much resembles the snorting of a frightened horse, but louder and longer; in performing this sound the bird vibrates its beak against the tree; the motion is so quick as to be invisible, and the head appears in two places at once. It is surprising, and to me wondrously pleasing, to observe the many varieties of tone and pitch in their loud churry, as they change their place on boughs of different vibration, as though they struck on the different bars of a gigantic staccato. When boring they make no noise whatever, but quietly and silently pick out the pieces of decaying wood, which, lying white and scattered beneath on the ground and plants, leads the eye up to their operations above. They have several favourite spots, to which they very frequently return. Their voice is a very feeble squeak, repeated rapidly six or eight times, *ee, ee, ee, ee, ee*. They bore numerous and very deep holes in decayed parts, where they retire to sleep early in the evening, and though frequently aroused will freely return. Whatever be the purpose of this enormous noise, they certainly do very nimbly watch and eagerly pick up the insects they have disturbed by it. They fly in jerks, and always alight on the side of a tree.”

“The loud noise above described,” says Macgillivray, “is supposed by some to be an amatory performance, as it is heard only or chiefly in spring, while others conjecture it to be produced by a rapid tapping of the bill, for the purpose of disturbing insects that are lodged in the bark. This latter opinion is more probable; for in spring it besides emits its ordinary notes so much more frequently and loudly than usual, that they may well pass for a love song.”

This species is very rare in Holland, but is very generally dispersed over nearly every other part of Europe, and in the forests of the three provinces of Algeria.

The sexes are distinguished by the colouring of the crown, which is scarlet in the male and white in the female, a distinction which also obtains in the young birds before they leave the tree in which they have commenced their existence; in all other respects the plumage of the two sexes is alike.

I have not failed to remark that our birds are very diminutive when compared with examples killed in Norway and Russia. I am certainly within the mark when I say that the Continental specimens are a fifth larger than those killed in this country. Our birds are also less pure in colour, both on the upper and under surface.

The male has the forehead pale brown, bounded above by a narrow line of dull white; crown scarlet interspersed with lighter marks when the bases of the feathers are exposed; occiput and nape black; each side of the nape white; under each ear-covert a patch of black; upper surface, wings, and four central tail-feathers black; wing-coverts tipped with white; wing-feathers with a series of angular spots of white on their outer webs and rounded spots of white on their inner webs; centre of the back white, irregularly barred across with black; the whole of these white markings forming, when the wings are closed, a series of bands across the body and wings; lateral tail-feathers black at the base largely tipped with white, which on the two outer ones is crossed by a couple of narrow interrupted bars of black; cheeks, throat, and under surface dirty white, with a few oblong lines of black on the sides of the chest, and a few blackish spots on the under tail-coverts; bill bluish lead-colour; legs, feet, and nails dark pea-green, the nails the darkest; irides brownish red; eyelash leaden grey.

In the young birds the general hue is the same; but there is a wash of yellow over the under surface, and a tinge of the same colour over all those parts which are white in the adult.

The Plate represents the two sexes and some young birds, all of the natural size.

Gould, John. 1873. "Lesser Spotted Woodpecker, *Picus minor* [Pl. 72]." *The birds of Great Britain* 3, -. <https://doi.org/10.5962/p.323958>.

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