

Parish Birds-Seventy Years of Change

This is another in a series of articles highlighting some of the most significant changes in the birds of our parish of Danehill and Chelwood Gate since the 1950s drawing particularly on the recollections of Paul Marten, born in the parish in 1942, augmented by the more recent observations of Clive Poole who became a Chelwood Gate resident in 2006.

Lesser Spotted Woodpecker (*Dendrocopos minor*)



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This *minute -and we mean really tiny (5 inches long)* member of the woodpecker family is very rarely seen nowadays and folk who see a common Great Spotted Woodpecker (9 inches long) often tick-off their sighting as a Lesser Spotted. One gets very tired of the old chestnut which people come out with, namely “it must be a Lesser Spotted Woodpecker “because it is lesser spotted! The “crack” gets corny after having heard it a few dozen times! The name used until the 1960s was **Barred Woodpecker** which is a much more accurate description since both sexes of this troglodyte have distinct white thin barring on their sparrow-sized backs, (The Great Spotted has obvious large white patches on its wings when perched, feeding at a bird-table and was formerly much better named-Pied Woodpecker).

The Lesser Spotted Woodpecker, no bigger than a sparrow, has a tiny beak. It cannot cope with pecking for insect food on the trunks of large healthy trees, nor can it excavate a nest hole in healthy wood, instead being confined to areas of woodland with old and decaying soft wood, plenty of standing dead timber, old veteran trees, rotting willows, alder around streams and especially old apple orchards. In former times these were plentiful but not in recent decades.

Paul and Jenny Marten used to come across Lesser Spotted Woodpeckers in the wet woodland along School Lane below Danehill Primary School and south of the Coach and Horses Inn, often drumming at a high pitch from the top branchlets of old oaks. They located them in the spring by their characteristic high-pitched “peeping” call. Paul also remembers them up to the 1970s in damp oak and alder woodland in the Braberry Ponds area along the Mill Brook stream near Whim Lane, Chelwood Gate. but he hasn’t seen or heard them for many years now.

The only Lesser Spotted Woodpecker that I have seen in the parish was in 2006 north of Braberry Ponds when this tiny bird flew to the top of a thin bare Rowan. Two or three pairs still cling on in the parish in old veteran trees on the Pippingford estate. Close by, at Hindleap Warren, a pair nested in 2022 in an old decaying veteran tree.

The “Barred Woodpecker” has been a resident English species since the Pleistocene era. Until recent times the special habitat for which it evolved was common. It has suffered catastrophically in recent decades from the grubbing out of old orchards ,and removal of “unsafe” decaying trees in the parish, as elsewhere throughout southern England. Yet another victim of the insatiable demands of intensive, high-yield agricultural practices and efficiency .

Clive Poole