

## Thorndon Birdlife May 2021

Spring is the time in Thorndon that the trees begin to take a hammering as Great Spotted Woodpeckers (*dendrocopos major*) establish their territories. I have heard at least three drumming near my house. This starling sized black and white bird doesn't have a song to advertise ownership of their chosen patch of woodland, so they make themselves known by drumming on dead trees or even metal with their powerful bills. They have a specialised lifestyle and require dead wood both for nesting and for feeding. Songbirds have their songs for communication, woodpeckers have their drumming. Males use their drumming supplemented with their calls for attracting females and establishing territory to other males.

The evolution of the birds drilling equipment has provided very sophisticated shock absorbing adaptations involving the way that the bird's beak joins the skull. The stresses are transmitted directly towards the centre of the brain and do not cause the knockout swirl. When woodpeckers hammer into the wood to get at grubs, they also have another anatomical adaptation designed to help them feed. The roots of their tongues are coiled round the back of their skulls and can be extended a prodigious distance to harpoon insect larvae in their tunnels. The Great Spotted Woodpecker's tongue protrudes 40mm beyond the tip of the bill. They are also very beneficial to the environment as they eat thousands of wood boring insects and other garden pests.

You can usually spot most woodpeckers spiralling around a tree trunk in search of food. It moves up a tree by hopping and it depends on their especially stiff tail feathers to serve as a prop. They work their way up a tree peering and poking into every nook and cranny and then either fly in an undulating fashion to a new area or glide down to a neighbouring tree to begin their foraging anew. It is an omnivore which eats a mixture of insects and seeds, mainly conifer. They will also take eggs and even young birds from nest holes and nest boxes when they have to feed their own young.

The Great Spotted Woodpecker is probably Europe's most belligerent woodpecker species. Juvenile birds have red foreheads that are replaced by black as they moult in the Autumn. Adult males have a red nape but females have no red on their head at all and all these differences in plumage are easy to see. Many people enjoy working out exactly which ones are coming into their gardens, male, female or juvenile.

There are probably some 25,000 to 30,000 pairs of these striking birds breeding in Britain, a few pairs now breed in Ireland, making them a recent colonist. There is another spotted woodpecker in the UK, the Lesser Spotted (*dendrocopos minor*) this bird is quite a rarity now and has been one of the most strongly declining bird species in Europe with widespread rapid decrease since 1980.

It is common nowadays to hear people talk of seeing Red Kites (*milvus milvus*) high up in Suffolk's famous big skies, I have seen five in two days. This magnificent graceful bird of prey is unmistakable with its reddish-brown body, angled wings and deeply forked tail.

It was saved from national extinction by one of the world's longest-running protection programmes. It has now been successfully re-introduced to England and Scotland. Red Kites are listed under Schedule 1 of The Wildlife and Countryside Act. It was once considered a threat to game birds and domestic animals like cats and dogs, the Red Kite was hunted close to extinction in the UK.

Now a protected species and following several reintroduction attempts, the number of red kites has recovered and they can be spotted in lots of places across the UK. Rather than purely hunting for food, Red Kites are in fact largely scavengers, so mainly like to eat scraps and small prey like rabbits. Listen out for their 'mewing' calls.

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