

Bird surveys Report

Wadhurst Park

April to June 2025

Dr Richard Black

Lesser Spotted Woodpecker Survey

A single visit to search for Lesser Spotted Woodpecker (LS) was made on Tuesday 27th May 2025 to Sharden, Rolf's Farm West and Butcher's Wood. The visit was timed to be when Lesser Spotted Woodpecker chicks were most likely to be in the last few days pre-fledging, based on reports from other nests coming from Ken Smith and the Lesser Spotted Woodpecker network. This is when they are making the most noise pre-fledging and are easiest to detect. This was a different approach to that taken in previous years, when the search was undertaken in late March or early April when LS are drumming and excavating nests.

The first stop was at Sharnden and Rolf's Farm West to survey likely areas (08:00 – 12:15). I had previously encountered LS at the southern end of transect 6 and in early May Bradley Draga-Williams had seen an adult in the ghyll next to transect 3. Both areas were searched along with other likely ghyll woodlands. The ghyll alongside transect 3 proved to have some very suitable habitat with trees containing excavations that may have been old LS holes. However, there was no evidence that any were active. An active woodpecker nest was found near transect 3 but this proved to be Great Spotted Woodpecker (GS). This was at approximately: TQ 6136 2757. Another nest on Sharnden transect 12 (at approximately: TQ 6015 2753) had looked very promising for LS being a smallish looking hole in a broken Alder. However, when a bird emerged it turned out to be a GS. The nest was so typical of a LS I wonder if it might have been originally excavated by the smaller species and then taken over by a GS.

At 10:10 I met with Martin Allison, Ken Smith and Linda Smith to investigate a Lesser Spotted Woodpecker nest found by Martin on Rolf's Ghyll close to Rolf's Farm West point

count number 11 (at approximately: TQ 6174 2762). When we arrived at least one LS chick was calling loudly from the nest, confirming we were in the right time window, although it is possible that one or more had already fledged. Unfortunately the hole was too high up for Ken and Linda's "camera on a pole" so we were unable to confirm how many chicks were still in the nest. I also located another active GS nest hole at the southern end of Rolf's Ghyll (at approximately: TQ 6160 2704).

Moving on to Butchers Wood (12:30 -13:30) the weather started to deteriorate significantly becoming windy and rainy. No woodpeckers were located and I was forced to abandon the survey.

Transect Surveys

The more open areas of Wadhurst are being surveyed by means of transects. In 2025 I conducted two transect surveys at Great Pigstood and Sharnden. See the separate excel spread sheets ("Pigstood Bird Transects 2025" and "Sharnden Bird Transects 2026") for the birds and weather at both sites. At both sites every effort was made to avoid double counting: a bird that had already been seen or heard from one transect was not re-counted if it was heard or seen from another transect. Where there was doubt, I erred on the side of caution and did not count a bird if it seemed likely than it could be a repeat individual. The order of the transects was changed for the second visit at each site to vary the time of day that each transect was walked. Some additional notes on Great Pigstood and Sharnden follow:

Great Pigstood

Dates: 03/05/2025 (05:45 – 09:15)

08/06/2025 (05:25 – 08:45)

Comments

Transects 1, 2 and 3 are fields with a stream running to the north. Many of the fields are naturally wet and rushy, especially those covered by transects 1, 2, 7 and 9.

Great Pigstood is a relatively compact area and the nine transects provide very good coverage. Indeed, the transects would be a good route to use with the Common Bird Census (CBC) methodology. I would expect to have picked up most of the bird territories over the

two visits although the two visit survey technique can sometimes miss rarer or less conspicuous species that require more visits to pick up consistently.

On the first visit many resident birds were in song notably Wood Pigeon, Stock Dove, Dunnock, Robin, Wren, Goldcrest (four territories this year compared to three last year), Great Tit, Blue Tit, Coal Tit, Blackbird, Song Thrush, Mistle Thrush, Goldfinch, Chaffinch, Skylark and Yellowhammer. Migrants in song were Whitethroat, Lesser Whitethroat, Blackcap, and Chiffchaff. Canada Geese were, noisily present on the first visit and a pair of Egyptian Geese flew over.

Yellowhammers have increased here in recent years and there were at least six (and possibly seven) territories. This is the same as last year and the species may be reaching saturation point with the current habitat availability. By contrast only one Reed Bunting territory was found but that may be related to the very dry spring and summer of 2025. Reed Bunting have a wide European range but, within that, are restricted to areas of dense vegetation with intense soil moisture. It is notable that the single territory was on transect 9, which is the wettest part of the site. The dry year is probably the reason that neither Snipe nor Jack Snipe were seen on the first visit.

There were two Great Spotted Woodpeckers drumming on the first visit and a third, which may have been the partner of one of the drummers, was seen. Four were recorded on the second visit when Nuthatch was also present. A Meadow Pipit territory was recorded on transect 4 on the second visit. A species not detected in 2023. Collared Dove, House Sparrow and Linnet were again present near Great Pigstrood Farm.

Starling were previously also regularly seen near Great Pigstrood Farm but, as in 2023, were not recorded this year. Unlike 2023 no Garden Warbler was located here this year nor were Pied Wagtail, Bullfinch or Treecreeper. Cuckoo were again absent during both surveys.

Recently fledged juveniles of Blue Tit, Great Tit, Linnet and Chiffchaff were evidence of successful breeding for those species.

Management suggestions

- The stream is fenced off to allow riverine scrub development, which would be a very valuable habitat, but this is developing very slowly. Fallow Deer were again seen on site this year and temporary deer fencing could be tried to allow the scrub to establish.

- Encouraging more scrub in the field corners while allowing the hedgerows to bush out would definitely be beneficial for wildlife.
- The site as a whole could be improved ecologically by some Natural Flood Management (NFM) measures designed to hold the water on the land for longer over the summer. Using woody debris dams in ditches or across flow-paths could do this and also create a greater variety of habitat niches.
- The addition of a water body to the site, a scrape or pond, with shallow sloping edges, could make a significant difference to a number of species. This includes Turtle Dove, which have previously been recorded on site, and which require easily accessible water within 100 metres of the nest site.
- Potentially a larger waterbody could include an area of reed bed, creating a new habitat on the site.

Sharnden

Dates: 27/04/2025 (05:40 – 10:40)

11/06/2025 (05:20 – 10:50)

Comments

The landscape at Sharnden is composed of large fields with hedgerows and woodlands. Most of the woodlands are “shaws”, being relatively long and thin. The exception to this is where transect 5 runs through the southern end of Combe Wood. Sharnden is a much larger area than Great Pigstod and the transects are much more widely spread out. A much smaller proportion of the birds at this site are typically detected on the surveys.

Transect 1 is a short transect around Sharnden Old Manor Farm and Farm Cottages. The end of transect 5 comes into the same area. There are quite a few habitats clustered here. Collared Dove was once again seen on the buildings but, surprisingly, Pied Wagtail was not seen. However, Grey Wagtail was again seen on this transect after apparently having relocated to transect 2 in 2023.

Transect 2 is a long transect following a hedgerow beside large open fields. There was a good selection of common species along the hedgerow. As in previous years all three of Blackbird, Song Thrush and Mistle thrush were in song. Great Spotted Woodpecker was drumming and, on the second visit, a Green Woodpecker flew up off the field at the northern end of the transect, where it had been, presumably, finding ants to feed on.

Transect 3 runs north beside a ghyll woodland through a narrow sloping field that has well developed scrub at the southern end. Blackcap are common here but, unlike previous surveys none of Whitethroat, Garden Warbler or Bullfinch were located. Marsh Tit, however, were much more prominent close to the transect. This is a valuable area because scrub is a relatively rare habitat on the estate, much of the woodland has little understory, with deer grazing pressure likely a major factor in this. UK species evolved in a world that was a mosaic of open ground, woodland and scrub and it is the last of these that is in the shortest supply. The hedgerows, especially where they are being laid and thickened are acting as a proxy for scrub but creating more scrubby habitat would be very beneficial to birds and other species, including invertebrates. This would be especially beneficial as the current scrub grows on and becomes unsuitable for early succession species. Allowing field corners and woodland edges to develop scrub would be beneficial. This could be done with temporary deer fencing to allow growth to establish. Once established cutting back the growth or allowing some grazing would encourage thicker growth and, on some species, more thorns. Ideally there would be enough scrub to manage on rotation so that there would always be all growth stages available on site.

Transect 4 runs crosses fields between blocks of woodlands. The northern end of this transect is a good example of an area that is just beginning to scrub up and Whitethroat, an early succession warbler was found here for the first time.

Transect 5 runs through woodland. The woodland here is quite uniform and would benefit from some management to open up the canopy, letting in light to allow understory and develop variety in the age structure. On both visits Marsh Tit was calling and Treecreeper was singing. On the second visit Mistle Thrush and Stock Dove were other notable songsters. Unusually a Moorhen was seen scurrying along the woodland floor, presumably headed for the woodland pond.

Transects 6, 7 and 8 pass through similar habitats, smallish fields surrounded by woodland. A Cuckoo heard in the distance from transect 6 was my only record of this species at Wadhurst this year. Dunnock, likely to be the main host species at Sharnden, were still present in good numbers and any decline is likely to be a result of the continuing England-wide decline in the species. Stock Dove was heard on all three transects, Marsh Tit and Treecreeper on transects 7 and 8 and Garden Warbler in maturing scrub on transect 8. Raven was present in the area on both surveys.

Transect 9 passes through Minepits Shaw. Unusually no Marsh Tit were found here this year but Coal tit was and other woodland birds included Stock Dove, Nuthatch and Treecreeper. Between transect 9 and 10 is an open section giving a view to the fields to the north. As usual Swallows were hawking and Buzzards soaring over the barns here, although the Pied Wagtails that are usually sitting on the barn roofs were not seen.

Transect 10, which passes through in Sandpit Wood, has very similar habitats to transect 9 and typically has a similar mix of species. The most notable record of this year's surveys was found here which was Hawfinch. This was first picked up by its distinctive call and subsequently located. Although only a single bird was confirmed visually movement higher in the canopy suggest other individuals may have been present.

Transects 11, 13, and 14 follow hedgerows on the edge of more open fields. The laid hedge along transect 11 is improving year on year. Marsh Tit, on both surveys, and Green Woodpecker were among the notable sightings here. A single Swallow flew overhead on the second visit. Transect 12 travels roughly west to east along a stream with scrub along the edge and woodland on the southern bank. There was a Great Spotted woodpecker nest at the western end and the only Greenfinch I located during this year's survey was singing here. Other notable songsters included Stock Dove, Mistle Thrush, Treecreeper and Goldcrest. A pair of Mandarin Ducks were in the stream. As in previous surveys, these transects produced the expected mix of woodland and woodland edge birds, but no farmland specialists. Transect 13 did produce the only Bullfinch record of this year's Sharden survey. This species seems to be less common, or at least less conspicuous than previously.

Far fewer fledged juveniles were seen on the second visit than in 2023. This may be in some way related to the very dry year but whether it was due to a change in the timing of fledging, a poor breeding year or some other factor is impossible to say for certain.