



Great Spotted Woodpecker

Scientific Name: *Dendrocopus major*

Irish Name: Mórchnagaire breac

The Great Spotted Woodpecker is common in the UK and on mainland Europe; there are an estimated 140,000 pairs breeding in the UK. In Ireland, it is a different story. Until recently, visiting Great Spotted Woodpeckers were only seen from time to time but this has begun to change in the last ten years or so. There are now about 30 pairs breeding on the east coast of Ireland. They mainly centre around Co. Wicklow but have been seen in various counties from Louth down to Wexford.

The Great Spotted Woodpecker is about the size of a thrush or starling. It has distinctive black and white colouring, with red underneath its tail. The adult male has a small red patch on the back of its neck, while the young bird has a red crown.

Knock, Knock?

The woodpecker is famous for pecking at trees. The sound they make is known as “drumming” and this activity has three purposes. Woodpeckers use their strong, chisel-like beak like a hammer to:

- search for insects and insect larvae;
- dig holes in dead or dying trees to form nests;
- to communicate with other birds, either to find a mate or to alert other birds of their territory.

You would think the “drumming” would give them a headache but woodpeckers have adapted heads for this purpose. Their skull is made so it can compress and expand, a little like sponge, so as to withstand the great force. Woodpeckers also have a tendon at the back of their jaw that acts like a shock-absorber.



Red, Amber or Green?

Every few years, BirdWatch Ireland and RSPB Northern Ireland provide a list of priority bird species for conservation action on the island of Ireland. Birds on the **Red List** are those of highest conservation concern, **Amber List** birds are of medium conservation concern and the **Green List** birds are not considered threatened. For 2014-2019 list, the Irish population of Great Spotted Woodpecker are on the Amber list of species.

FACT FILE:

Colour: Black and white with red patches

Length: 23-24 cm

Diet: Insect larvae, pine cones and have been known to eat birds and their chicks in the nest.

Habitat: Deciduous woodlands

No. of eggs: Can lay up to 7 eggs per year

Group Name: The collective noun for a group of woodpeckers is a **descent** of woodpeckers.