

The first known successful breeding of the Firecrest *Regulus ignicapilla* in Worcestershire

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According to the latest BTO Bird Atlas (Balmer *et al.* 2013) the breeding distribution of the Firecrest has changed, with a 935% increase in occupation of 10-km squares since the 1968-72 *Breeding Atlas*. Until 2003 breeding was stable at around 100 pairs, but since then there has been a rapid increase to an estimated 700-800 territories in 2013 (Holling *et al.* 2015) with the main concentration within south-eastern and eastern England between Hampshire (187 territories) and Norfolk (55). Undoubtedly this remarkable rise in numbers is linked to a recent increase in field work and surveys in some counties; this coinciding with many observers now being more familiar with the high-pitched song, although it can be inaudible to some recorders and, no doubt, will have resulted in some under-recording.

Nevertheless, at present, the Firecrest remains a rare bird north-west of a line between the Wash and Poole Harbour (Balmer *et al.* 2013). Of Worcestershire's neighbouring counties, Gloucestershire has a regular breeding population in the Forest of Dean, where up to five pairs have been proved or suspected of breeding in all but a few years since the early 1980s (Kirk & Philips, 2013), and Davies *et al.* (2014) reported confirmed breeding on four occasions at a locality in north-west Herefordshire between 2007-2012. In addition it is worth mentioning that since 2008 a few pairs have been proved to breed in the Presteigne area of Radnorshire (Jennings, 2014).

Prior to 1970 the Firecrest was considered a rare winter visitor to the West Midlands with just ten records, the majority (60%) coming from Worcestershire, especially the Lickeys (Harrison *et al.* 1982). Since then there has been a steady increase in records in line with the national trend. In Worcestershire, between 2000 and 2012, there were a total of twenty-seven records, six in spring, nine in autumn and twelve in winter. Four of the records involved two birds and one of three. In the West Midlands Harrison & Harrison (2005) stated that most birds were recorded between October and January, or in April, suggesting many were passage migrants, but at least some appeared to over-winter.

Of the six Worcestershire spring records (March-April) four were of singing birds which may have been holding territory, and at one locality on the Clent Hills birds were seen in consecutive years (2003/4). Yet despite the recent increase in spring records there has been no firm evidence of possible breeding in the county since 1989. Prior to this attempted breeding took place in the Lickeys in 1975, when there were at least three singing birds and a nest was seen, apparently in a Larch *Larix* sp.; this was later destroyed, probably by Grey Squirrels. Elsewhere, singing birds were discovered in the Callow Hill area of Wyre Forest in 1981 and 1982 with three in 1987; birds were seen carrying food at an unspecified site in the west in 1988, and in 1989 two pairs were present (June/July) at a northern locality. Unfortunately on none of these occasions was any positive proof of successful breeding reported.

However, on April 1st 2015 I was bird-watching with Mike Inskip in the Teme Valley when we came across a singing male in scrub on the margin of deciduous woodland. A few weeks later Joe Sparey (JS) detected the bird at the same spot. The bird continued to sing and hold territory, until on May 22nd JS saw a pair together. The birds were involved in calling and chasing each other from tree to tree and on one occasion one was seen carrying fluff in its beak. By the middle of June there appeared to be a set pattern, whereby the male was seen out in the open calling, possibly to the female who was incubating. From the 3rd July JS saw both parents carrying beaks full of insects and after many hours of careful observation discovered the nest site on the 13th July.

The breeding area was in deciduous woodland consisting mainly of Ash *Fraxinus excelsior* with an understorey of scattered Hazel

Corylus avellana and Holly *Ilex aquifolium*. Fortunately the nest site was on a small rise which allowed excellent viewing from further up the slope at virtually the same level as the nest. The nest itself was behind ivy some 5.2 m from ground level up the trunk of rather spindly Wych Elm *Ulmus glabra* with a diameter of just 18 cm at 1.5 m. In August JS photographed the nest which consisted of a mixture of material including moss, sheep's wool, feathers and a piece of green string (01).



01. Firecrest nest. Joe Sparey

On the 14th July we watched through telescopes from a safe distance and observed both parents regularly visiting the nest with food. We definitely saw three young, but on the 17th JS saw four, although strongly suspected there may have been five or more. The young appeared fairly well-grown and fledged on either the 19th or 20th. The last date JS saw them was on the 25th July, and although they were difficult to observe as they were high-up in the canopy, at least three juveniles and an adult were seen. It seems that both parents and young dispersed from the area immediately afterwards as we never heard or saw them subsequently. A fifteen week gap between the first sighting and fledging suggests this could well have been a second brood, any earlier breeding attempt having either failed or gone undetected.

Surprisingly neither Kirk & Philips (2013) nor Davies (2014) give details of the breeding habitat, but Jennings (2014) mentions the breeding site in Radnorshire as 'well-spaced, tall, conifers of a variety of species with a well developed under story of young deciduous trees, particularly Elder, Willow and Hazel'. In contrast Piotrowski (2003) stated that in Suffolk nesting most often occurred in tall yews or holly with nesting pairs frequenting large gardens and small copses. In the New Forest Hampshire survey work in 2011 found 255 territories (34% of the total UK population). Although the birds were found in a variety of woodland habitats, in 2009 83% were in conifer species, but this figure had fallen to 60% in 2011; beech and oak woodland with an understorey of holly also being an important habitat, particularly where ivy was present. It is also worth noting that Simms (1985) mentions that around the Mediterranean he had seen birds in ever-green oaks and alders with the nests often built amongst ivy hanging from the alders.

In conclusion, although it does appear the Teme Valley birds chose an unusual nest site, nevertheless, from early March onwards in 2016 it would be worth searching and listening in any mixed deciduous woodland, especially if ivy-clad trees are present, but in particular re-visiting the mature coniferous plantations of the former sites on the Clent Hills, the Lickeys and in Wyre Forest would be a priority.

References

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Image

01. Firecrest nest. Joe Sparey