PICUS MINOR, Linn.

Lesser Spotted Woodpecker.

Picus minor, Linn. Syst. Nat., tom. i. p. 176.

— varius minor, Briss. Orn., tom. iv. p. 41.

— striolatus, Macgill. Hist. Brit. Birds, vol. iii. p. 86.

— discolor minor, Frisch, Vög., pl. 37.

Dendrocopus minor, Koch, Baier. Zool.

Picus pipra, Pall. Zoog. Ross. Asiat., tom. i. p. 414.

— Ledouci, Mahl. Faun. Orn. Algérie, p. 22.

Pipripicus minor, Bonap. Consp. Vol. Zyg. 1854.

Piculus pusillus, P. hortorum, P. herbarum, P. crassirostris, Brehm, der Vollft. Vogelf., p. 70, 1855.

The Lesser Spotted Woodpecker is stated by some writers to be one of our rarest birds; but in this opinion I cannot coincide, for I am sure that if looked for it may be found in every English county from Cornwall to Yorkshire. North of this I admit it becomes more scarce, and beyond the Scottish border it is not to be met with; neither does it occur in Ireland. Morris, in his 'British Birds,' states that one was shot near Stromness, in Orkney, by Mr. Low in 1774, and another was observed at Sanday on the 14th of October 1823; but these were in all probability stray birds from northern Europe. This Woodpecker is so common in all suitable situations within an area of fifty miles round London, that it is quite unnecessary to name any particular places in which it may be found. In my 'Birds of Europe,' published in 1837, I stated that Kensington Gardens was one of its favourite resorts; but the vast increase in our great city, and the consequent superabundance of smoke, having rendered the fine old trees in those gardens no longer tenable by insects, the bird has deserted that locality. In Richmond and Windsor Parks, the woods of Taplow and Cliveden, and the fine elms of the playing-fields at Eton it is tolerably numerous.

The actions of the Lesser Spotted Woodpecker are restless in the extreme, for the bird is constantly flitting from branch to branch, and from tree to tree. Like the Long-tailed Tit, it appears to have a daily round, at one time traversing the great woods, at others the line of elms growing in the hedgerow. It seldom descends to the large boles, but flits from top to top with an onward movement, in the course of which a considerable distance is traversed between morning and night. This bird especially attracted my attention in the days of my boyhood; and from that period to the present time I have watched it with great interest, in order that I might become acquainted with its breeding-places and economy, respecting which so little has been recorded that I may be excused if I should be somewhat diffuse on the subject. To render credit where credit is due, I must first acknowledge my obligations to Mr. Briggs, gardener to M. de Vitré, Esq., of Formosa, near Cookham, in Berkshire, for the assistance he has rendered me in the acquisition of the knowledge I desired. During the last few years several pairs have bred in this beautiful spot, their holes being always made in the upright stems of the broken branches of the loftiest poplars, at such a height as to be all but inaccessible to any one but a sailor or an Australian "black fellow." Aware of my anxiety to become acquainted with every detail connected with the history of this species for the purposes of the present work, Briggs, at considerable risk both to body and limb, has mounted several of these mast-like stems, sawn them off, and lowered them to the ground without the least injury to the eggs or the young birds.

About the end of April 1861, a pair commenced excavating in one of the lofty poplars alluded to, at which they laboured assiduously for two or three weeks, bringing the chips, one by one, to the opening, and throwing them out in quick succession; after the work appeared to be completed, a certain time was allowed to elapse for the deposition of the eggs, when the dead branch was sawn off a few inches below where the bottom of the excavation was supposed to be. A hole, perfectly round and an inch and a half in diameter, had been made about six inches from the extremity of the branch (the upper part of which had been blown off by made about six inches from the extremity of the branch (the upper part of which had been blown off by the wind), and was continued downward for about a foot, gradually increasing in diameter to the bottom, the wind), and was continued downward for about a foot, gradually increasing in diameter to the bottom, where it terminated in a round cavity about the size of a breakfast-cup. Unfortunately, sufficient time had not been allowed for the deposit of the full complement of eggs, three only having been laid, on a few chips of wood almost as fine as sawdust.

In the year following, the same pair of birds drilled a circular hole through the flinty bark of the same branch, and excavated down the stem to a similar depth. On sawing off the branch, on the 10th of June, bound birds, nearly ready to fly, were found in the cavity. They were very active, frequently ascending to the entrance of the hole, and uttering a loud querulous cry. These young birds were sent to the Zoological Society, but did not survive many days.