

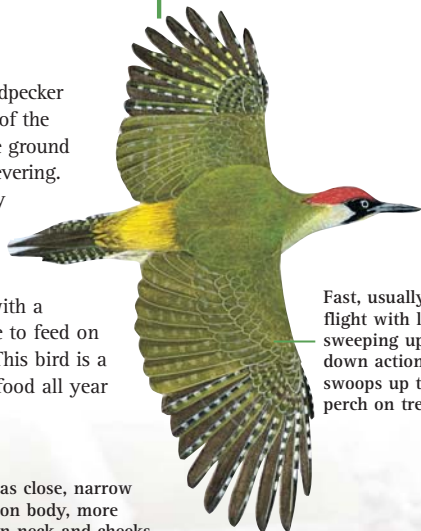


# Green Woodpecker

*Picus viridis*

It can be frustrating tracking a Green Woodpecker down for a close view, as this, the largest of the British woodpeckers, is often found on the ground rather than in trees. But it is well worth persevering.

The Green Woodpecker is a shy and easily disturbed bird, flying off with loud, yelping calls and showing a bold patch of vivid yellow above the tail. It is not usually a garden bird, unless you have a large lawn with a healthy population of ants; it does not come to feed on peanuts or fatballs hung from a bird table. This bird is a real specialist; more than 90 per cent of its food all year round is ants, ant eggs and ant larvae.



Fast, usually low flight with long, sweeping up and down action; swoops up to perch on tree



Juvenile has close, narrow dark bars on body, more streaked on neck and cheeks. Cap is mottled red

Vivid red cap

Dagger-like, pale grey bill

Body dull green, brighter on back, paler below, wings fade browner late in summer

Bright yellow patch on lower back

Dark patch around whitish eye: male has red centre to black moustache

Stiff, pointed tail used as a 'prop' against the trunk of a tree

Green Woodpecker eggs are glossy white

3.18cm (1.25in)

## Birder's Tip



Due to the multitudes of ants they eat in a day, Green Woodpeckers produce copious amounts of very distinctive droppings. They look rather like narrow columns of cigarette ash with a white tip, made up of the remains of these tiny insects.

## KEY FACTS



**Length:** 30-33cm (12-13in)

**Wingspan:** 40-42cm (16in)

**Weight:** 180-220g (6.3-7.6oz)

**Food & feeding:** Almost exclusively ants, their pupae and eggs, taken by probing with the relatively weak bill and the very long, pointed, sticky tongue; also moths and other insects; occasionally acorns, grain, apples, cherries and other fruit

**Voice:** Unlike most other woodpeckers, rarely drums on trees; often a loud, ringing *kew kew kew*; in spring, shouted, laughing *kleu-kleu-kleu-kleu* on high, even pitch – the territorial call known as the 'yaffle'

**Nest:** Hole chipped into tree trunk or large branch by both sexes, usually 2-6m above ground, 6.5cm across entrance, chips left scattered on ground

**Eggs:** 5-7, white

**Incubation:** 17-19 days, by both sexes

**Fledging:** 23-27 days

**Broods:** 1

**Breeding season:** April to July

**Maturity:** 1 year

**When present:** All year

Green Woodpeckers can be seen clumsily hopping around before digging for ants in grass or anthills.



Despite its dagger-like bill, this woodpecker doesn't chip easily into the bark of trees; it is in raiding ant nests that it is most expert. Its specially designed tongue curls right around the back of its skull, but is pushed out about twice the length of the head and bill when the bird is feeding. The tip of the tongue is sticky and barbed, so no ant is likely to escape a woodpecker's probing inside a narrow ant nest tunnel.

Green Woodpeckers suffer in winter; if there is thick ice they can't reach their food and many die of starvation. In Britain, numbers fluctuate according to the severity of the winter: in recent years, they have been doing well as the weather has become much milder.

## DISTRIBUTION

**Movements:** Generally resident across most of Europe; absent from Ireland, like all woodpeckers.



**Population:** Around 15-20,000 pairs in Britain, mostly in England and Wales.