



# THE OBSERVER

## SECOS Newsletter

Promoting and fostering an interest in ornithology by observation, research and record-keeping

## August 2023



Magpie Nest - Auke-Florian Hiemstra / Naturalis Biodiversity Center

### Magpies Incorporate Metal Spikes Into Their Nests

Magpies have for a long time intrigued us with their intelligence. These highly adaptable birds have captured our attention once again with their astonishing nesting behaviour. Traditionally, magpies construct dome-shaped nests using twigs, branches, grass, and other natural materials. However, recent observations have revealed an astonishing departure from conventional nesting materials. In certain areas, magpies have started to incorporate metal spikes into their nests. Some nests are constructed almost entirely from strips of long metal spikes that are often attached to buildings to deter birds. The birds appear to be positioning the sharp spikes outwards, maximising protection.

continued on next page >>

In the courtyard of a hospital in Antwerp, Belgium, an enormous magpie nest was found containing some 1,500 spikes. A trip to the hospital roof confirmed that about 50 metres of anti-bird spike strips had been ripped off the building. The glue used to attach the spikes to buildings is strong and the spikes are not easy to remove. Other examples have been seen in Glasgow and Enschede in the Netherlands.

Human-made objects being used in bird nests are not new. There is evidence of species around the world using everything from barbed wire to knitting needles. Even condoms and fireworks are frequently encountered by researchers, alongside cocaine wraps, sunglasses and windshield wipers!

The irony is that magpies are using the material that we made to keep them away, to make a nest to make more magpies!

There are several possible reasons for this behaviour:

### **Nest Defence**

One plausible explanation for the use of metal spikes is nest defence. By incorporating sharp and protruding spikes, magpies create a physical deterrent to potential predators, such as larger birds and mammals.

### **Symbol of Dominance**

Magpies are highly territorial and fiercely defend their nesting areas. By adorning their nests with metal spikes, magpies may be signalling their dominance over other birds in the vicinity.

### **Nest Stability and Durability**

Metal spikes may provide structural stability and longevity to nests. By interweaving the spikes with twigs and branches, magpies create a more robust framework, better able to withstand adverse weather conditions and remain intact for longer periods.

### **Aesthetic Display**

Metal spikes might serve an aesthetic purpose. These striking additions could be a visual display intended to attract mates or establish a bond within a pair.

### **Implications and Future Research**

The inclusion of metal spikes in magpies' nests challenges our understanding of avian behaviour and their ability to adapt to their environment. It highlights the remarkable cognitive abilities and problem-solving skills of these birds, demonstrating their capacity to innovate and utilise available resources. Further research is required to gain deeper insights into this intriguing behaviour. Scientists could study the environmental factors that drive magpies to incorporate metal spikes, explore regional variations in this behaviour, and assess its impact on nest success and breeding outcomes.

### **Sources**

**BBC:** <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/science-environment-66163943>

**Daily Mail:** <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/sciencetech/article-12290549/Crows-magpies-using-anti-bird-spikes-build-nests-study-finds.html>

**The Guardian:** <https://www.theguardian.com/science/2023/jul/11/crows-and-magpies-show-their-metal-by-using-anti-bird-spikes-to-build-nests>



# Sightings - July

## Highlights (first reports this month)

1<sup>st</sup> Common Sandpiper, Curlew, Goldeneye, Great White Egret, Little Ringed Plover, Oystercatcher, Quail, Yellowhammer; 2<sup>nd</sup> Dipper, Goosander, Kingfisher, Redshank; 3<sup>rd</sup> Little Grebe, Raven; 4<sup>th</sup> Mandarin Duck; 6<sup>th</sup> Barn Owl, Egyptian Goose, Green Sandpiper, Tawny Owl; 7<sup>th</sup> Yellow-legged Gull; 9<sup>th</sup> Whimbrel; 10<sup>th</sup> Red-legged Partridge; 13<sup>th</sup> Osprey, Red Kite; 15<sup>th</sup> Little Egret; 17<sup>th</sup> Black-tailed Godwit, Common Snipe; 20<sup>th</sup> Common Tern, Dunlin; 23<sup>rd</sup> Cuckoo

Wildfowl	Count
Shelduck	regular, max 27
Wigeon	regular, max 1
Gadwall	regular, max 4
Teal	regular, max 8
Mallard	Regular, max c300
Shoveler	regular, max 4
Tufted Duck	2, 8 <sup>th</sup>
<b>Goldeneye</b>	1, 1 <sup>st</sup>
Greylag Goose	regular, max 19
Canada Goose	regular, max 28
G C Grebe	1, 9 <sup>th</sup> , 16 <sup>th</sup> , 23 <sup>rd</sup>
Coot	regular, max 12
Moorhen	regular, max 8
Mute Swan	regular, max 5

## EHF/PHF



Mediterranean Gull - Dennis Swaby



Curlew - Dennis Swaby

Waders	Count
<b>Oystercatcher</b>	regular, max 4
<b>L Ringed Plover</b>	regular, max 9
<b>Black-tailed Godwit</b>	1, 17 <sup>th</sup>
Lapwing	regular, max c260
<b>Common Snipe</b>	1, 15 <sup>th</sup>
<b>Dunlin</b>	1, 20 <sup>th</sup>
<b>Curlew</b>	regular, max 23
<b>Common Sandpiper</b>	regular, max 2
Green Sandpiper	regular, max 2

CF = Crabmill Flash

EHF = Elton Hall Flash

FF = Fodens Flash

FFF = Fields Farm Flash

GF = Groby Flash

MGT = Maw Green Tip

PHF = Pump House Flash

RF = Railway Flash

WF = Warmingham Flash WLF = Watch Lane Flash

**Blue text** indicates place first seen. Underline indicates high flock count (see Feb 2020 Newsletter, page 8).

# Sightings - July

## EHF/PHF



Great Crested Grebe (juvenile) - Dennis Swaby

Raptors & Owls	Count
Sparrowhawk	1, 9 <sup>th</sup> , 15 <sup>th</sup>
Common Buzzard	regular, max 2
Red Kite	1, 13 <sup>th</sup>
Osprey	1, 13 <sup>th</sup>
Hobby	1, 9 <sup>th</sup>

Hérons & Egrets	Count
Grey Heron	regular, max 4
Little Egret	1, 8 <sup>th</sup> , 18 <sup>th</sup> , 29 <sup>th</sup>
Great White Egret	regular, max 2

Gulls & Terns	Count
Mediterranean Gull	1, 23 <sup>rd</sup>
Black-headed Gull	regular, max 146
Lesser Black-b Gull	regular, max 26
Herring Gull	regular, max 5
Yellow-legged Gull	regular, max 1
Common Tern	1, 20 <sup>th</sup>



Little Egret - Dennis Swaby

## Sightings Elsewhere

**EHF/PHF:** Greenfinch, Jay, Rook, Sand Martin, Stock Dove, Swift

**FF:** Barn Owl, Tawny Owl

**MGT:** Osprey

**Alsager - Borrow Pit Meadows:** Blackcap, Bullfinch, Greenfinch, House Martin, Nuthatch, Whitethroat

**Congleton - River Dane:** Dipper, Goosander, Kingfisher, Mandarin Duck

**Congleton - Somerford:** Cuckoo

**Doddington:** Common Sandpiper, Egyptian Goose, Kingfisher, Little Egret, Little Grebe, Osprey, Oystercatcher, Raven, Red-legged Partridge, Redshank

**Middlewich - Limebeds:** Green Sandpiper

**Rode Heath - Rode Pool:** Egyptian Goose, Great Crested Grebe, Kingfisher, Mandarin Duck, Oystercatcher, Raven, Sparrowhawk

**Rudheath - Limebeds:** Curlew, Greenfinch, Jay, Oystercatcher, Peregrine, Raven, Rook, Sparrowhawk, Whimbrel

**Sandbach - Bradwall Green:** Grasshopper Warbler, Quail, Yellowhammer

**Scholar Green:** Red Kite

**Wybunbury Moss:** Greenfinch, Kingfisher, Reed Warbler, Sedge Warbler, Whitethroat



Great Spotted Woodpecker - Dennis Swaby

This is a small selection of species seen in the SECOS Recording Area.

A full listing is on the website:

<https://www.secos.org.uk/sightings/>

# Fanny's Croft - 12<sup>th</sup> July



13 members, many armed with umbrellas in addition to binoculars, attended an evening walk at Fanny's Croft, Alsager. Whilst in the carpark, as last year, we spotted a house martin's nest under the eaves of an adjacent house, with the birds busily flying in and out. Some gulls were also seen overhead, one being identified as a lesser black-backed. A short way along the footpath towards Brookhouse Farm, many swallows could be seen hunting over the fields, taking advantage of a break in the recent heavy rain. Song thrush, goldfinch, wren and blackcap were heard in the trees along the path, although the dense leaf cover meant that seeing the birds was a challenge. We did, however, get a good view of a greenfinch, which obligingly perched at the top of a tree in full view. We followed the usual route past the farm, via The Sprink, as far as the fields which lie close to the Cheshire/Staffordshire border. This is a good place for yellowhammer and we were not disappointed; several were seen including an excellent sighting of a male sitting atop the hedge, its beautiful colours illuminated in the evening sunlight! For me, this was definitely "bird of the day", although the sighting of a fox in a distant field was also a highlight (not a bird though!). A buzzard was also spotted perched on a distant pylon. Before retracing our steps towards The Sprink, we walked a short distance further along the hedgerow as there had been recent reports of Quail but, unfortunately, we were not in luck on this occasion.

Due to the fading light we made our way back at a fairly brisk pace towards the starting point, not only picking up kestrel and a pair of bullfinch, but also managing to disturb some local teenagers having an al fresco party in the woods – I'm not sure who was more surprised, us or them!

Amazingly, given the recent weather, we avoided any need for the umbrellas, and, for me, half a pint of Old Speckled Hen in The Railway rounded off a very pleasant evening stroll perfectly.

**Editor's Note:** *Old Speckled Hen counts as a tick.*

*Jean Harrison*

**2023 SECOS Field Trips Total = 162 species**

## Diary Dates



**8<sup>th</sup> Sep 7.30 p.m.**

Indoor Meeting

**Gateway to Sahara**

Speaker: Keith Offord

**17<sup>th</sup> Sep 10.00 a.m.**

Field Trip

**Attenborough NR**

Leader: Ian Taylor

🕸 SECOS Website: [www.secos.org.uk](http://www.secos.org.uk)

🕸 SECOS Blog (to read/record local sightings): [www.secos.org.uk/sightings](http://www.secos.org.uk/sightings)

🕸 Sandbach Flashes: This medium does not do justice to the images that Dennis Swaby captures at Sandbach Flashes. Some of the images have been uploaded to [www.sandbachflashes.co.uk](http://www.sandbachflashes.co.uk)