

New breeding records of Middle Spotted Woodpecker *Dendrocopos medius* in Abruzzo, Italy

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Abstract – In 2007 we found a pair of Middle Spotted Woodpeckers *Dendrocopos medius* nesting in an old beech stump in the Parco Nazionale d’Abruzzo, Lazio e Molise (PNALM); this was the third documented breeding record for the species in Abruzzo. This nesting territory, in a mature beech forest, was also occupied during the years 2008-2011. In this report we also describe the discovery of a new breeding area in Abruzzo which holds at least four more breeding pairs of this species.

The Middle Spotted Woodpecker is a resident breeding species in Italy, mainly confined to the central-southern Apennines and to the Gargano peninsula. The Italian regions in which it nests regularly include Puglia, Basilicata and Molise, while it is present but localized in Calabria, Campania, Abruzzo and Marche (Bricchetti & Fracasso 2007). Historically it was considered to be present but rare in Lazio, Umbria and Toscana as well, but recent observations from these regions are very scarce, and its possible status as a breeding species would need to be confirmed. In some areas, the presence of Middle Spotted Woodpeckers could well be overlooked or under-estimated, due to poor coverage.

For the Abruzzo region, previous to the breeding site discovered in 2007, there had only been two documented nesting records (Zunino 1983), when it had nested in the same dead tree stump for two consecutive years. A newly-fledged family had also been observed in the PNALM park by M. Cappelli in June 1999 (pers. comm.). Historical ornithological literature regarding Abruzzo, and the PNALM park in particular, considered Middle Spotted Woodpeckers to be present, but extremely rare and localized (Di Carlo 1972, Zunino 1983, Bernoni 1992, 1995).

The breeding site we found in 2007 was situated in a mature beech forest at approximately 1700 metres above sea level (Harris *et* Harris 2007). The dead beech stump was 12 metres high, and the nest-hole was about 8 metres from the ground. The Middle Spotted Woodpeckers nested in this dead stump again for the following two years - successful broods were raised both in 2008 and in 2009, and a new nest-hole was excavated each year. In 2010 and 2011 the stump was not used again but the birds were heard near-

by and breeding was certainly successful in 2011, when we observed a newly-fledged bird being fed by an adult only a few metres from the original stump. In 2012 and 2013 the woodpeckers were not seen or heard in this territory, and in 2013 the dead beech stump had fallen to the ground.

Meanwhile, new Middle Spotted Woodpecker territories were discovered in another area about 10 kms away, and checks carried out here during the years 2008-2013 revealed the regular presence of at least four pairs of Middle Spotted Woodpeckers, nesting in adjacent territories. The habitat here was more typical of the known requirements for this species, as it consisted of mixed oak/beechness woods with a few conifers, rather than pure beech woods (Pasinelli 2000). In common with the original 2007 breeding territory, the habitat was largely unspoilt, with the presence of a good number of tall, old trees. This population of Middle Spotted Woodpeckers appeared to be isolated, as research carried out in similar habitat nearby produced no further observations. The birds were also highly sedentary, being observed in the same areas in all seasons of the year, and seemed particularly faithful to their nesting trees.

Indeed, despite the relatively low number of occupied Middle Spotted Woodpecker nests found in Abruzzo so far (ten), the tendency to use the same trees for nesting seems to be statistically suspect, as the ten nests were found in only five different trees. Moreover, the presence of series of presumable old Middle Spotted Woodpecker holes in only a few other trees in the area seems to confirm this hypothesis, which is in general not typical of this woodpecker’s nesting habits in other parts of Europe (Gorman pers. comm., Pasinelli pers. comm.) - this could indicate that the birds have some difficulty in finding suitable trees for excavating their nest-holes.

The importance of conserving the mature high-standing trees used by the birds for nesting and, even more importantly, for foraging cannot be over-emphasized. Were these ancient trees to be felled these apparently isolated populations of Middle Spotted Woodpeckers in Abruzzo could well be at risk of local extinction, considering the poor dispersal capability of the species as well (Gorman 2004, Pasinelli 2003).

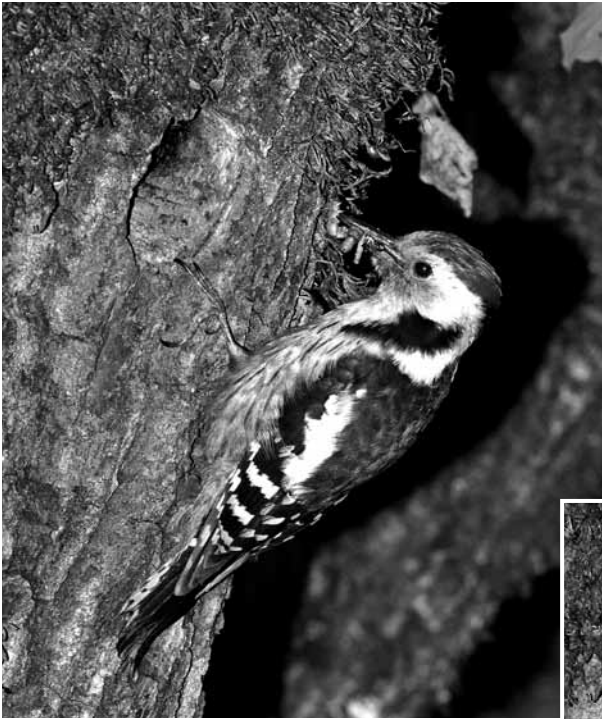


Figure 1. Adult Middle Spotted Woodpecker at nest-hole, Abruzzo, June 2011.



Figure 2. Adult and juv. Middle Spotted Woodpecker at nest, Abruzzo, June 2011.

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