

Range-expansion of the Black Woodpecker in Western Europe



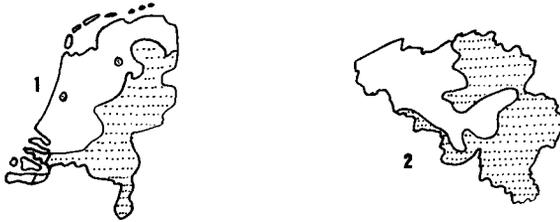
The Black Woodpecker *Dryocopus martius* is one of the few species which have in recent years considerably extended their breeding range in some western European countries. Nesting was first reported in Belgium around 1908, and in Luxemburg and the Netherlands in 1915. Westwards expansion continued in the Netherlands, where the species has now reached the coast (fig. 1; Teixeira 1979). In Belgium and Luxemburg, progression appears to have stopped, or slowed down greatly (figs. 2 & 3; Tricot 1977; Weiss 1979). It is in France and Denmark that range-extension has been the most spectacular.

Strangely, the Black Woodpecker did not breed in Denmark before 1961, when it nested in Nord Sjaelland. It reached Bornholm (about 30km from Sweden) towards 1950, but did not nest there until 1966 (Hansen 1973); it has now completely invaded this island. In Continental Denmark, its movement was not so rapid (fig. 4; Dybbro 1976).

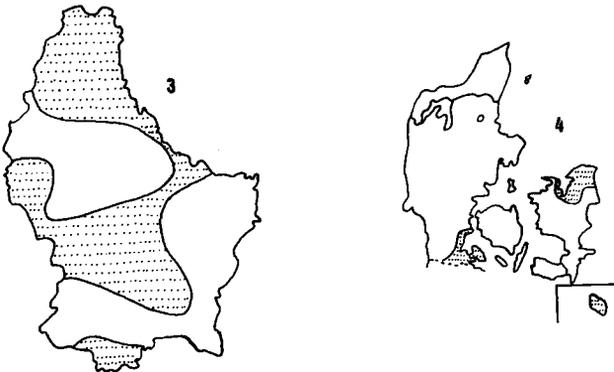
In France, before 1950, the Black Woodpecker bred only in mountainous areas (fig. 5), reports of sporadic nesting elsewhere not being fully confirmed. From 1957 onwards, breeding was recorded in a growing number of regions, and today it has even reached several western départements (fig. 6; Cuisin 1967, 1973, 1980; Yeatman 1976). Perhaps because of lack of observations, a few gaps remain in some inland regions, but the Black Woodpecker can be said now to inhabit the whole eastern half of France and a notable part of the western half. In 1983, it nested in at least 53 départements. Lack of suitable woodland may have locally hampered its spread towards the Channel. Its absence in some areas of France may seem surprising: for example, it has not yet been reported in the huge forest of Les

Landes (900,000ha), although it breeds in the Pyrénées mountains.

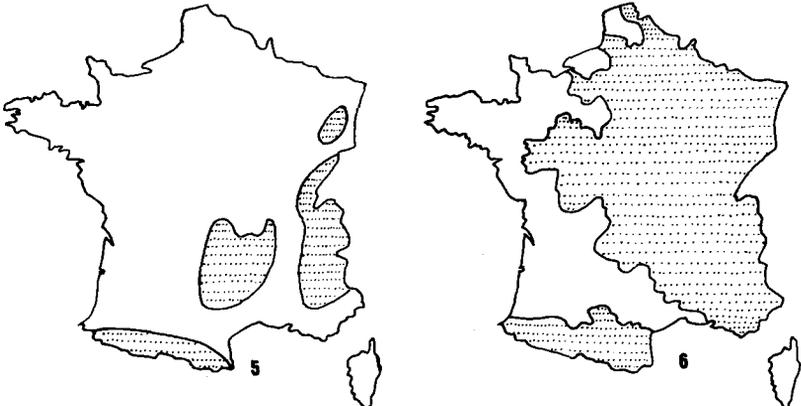
The Black Woodpecker is the sole western European woodland species that has exhibited such an increase, but why it has done so is unclear. One of the various hypotheses links this range-expansion with the plantation in many countries of coniferous trees. This tenet, however, is not acceptable everywhere, because conifers have been present for many years in some regions: examples include the Normandy hills, where they are indigenous; several forests around Paris; and since before 1850 in southern Champagne.



Figs. 1 & 2. Breeding distribution of Black Woodpecker *Dryocopus martius* in the Netherlands (from Teixeira 1979); and in Belgium (from Tricot 1977)



Figs. 3 & 4. Breeding distribution of Black Woodpecker *Dryocopus martius* in Luxembourg (from Weiss 1979); and in Denmark—inset, Bornholm island (from Dybbro 1976)



Figs. 5 & 6. Breeding distribution of Black Woodpecker *Dryocopus martius* in France before 1950; and in France recently (Yeatman 1976, updated to 1983)



Moreover, the Black Woodpecker very frequently excavates its nest in deciduous trees (mainly beech *Fagus sylvatica*, but also oak *Quercus*, poplar *Populus* and aspen *P. tremula*, among others); extensive coniferous tracts are not, therefore, a *sine qua non* of its existence. If the causes remain a complete mystery in France, however, it seems that a recent influx of Black Woodpeckers in Denmark may have been brought about by forest exploitation in Sweden (Hansen 1973). Whatever the reasons, it appears that, in a small part of its immense range (western Europe to Japan), the Black Woodpecker has moved from its 'classical' habitat.

Over 80 records of the Black Woodpecker have been claimed in Britain (Fitter 1959), but so far none has proven to be acceptable. In my opinion, its genuine occurrence in Britain is possible, for a sea-crossing presents no difficulties for this woodpecker. The most westerly sighting in France, in the Nieppe forest, near Bailleul, was only about 80 km from the sea coast. Further, the distance between the Danish island of Bornholm and Sweden is the same as that between Pas-de-Calais département and Kent, and immature Black Woodpeckers are known to be prone to travel very far from their birth-place.

Figs. 1-4 and 6 show the Black Woodpecker's present breeding areas in west-central Europe (a few gaps in France are not illustrated) as given in recent atlases and, for France, based also on information provided by correspondents. They do not show localities where the species has only been sighted, such as in France, where it has been reported not very far from the Atlantic coast in Loire-Atlantique.



78 & 79. Male Black Woodpecker *Dryocopus martius* at nest with young, Sweden, June 1959
(M. D. England)

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