spring 2008

the dormouse monitor

the newsletter of the national dormouse monitoring programme

people's trust for **endangered species**

INSIDE

Welcome

It is now 20 years since the NDMP was set up, which means that we have the longest-running national monitoring programme for any small mammal in the country. In 1988 we had five sites registered in two counties from which 384 dormice were recorded throughout the year. Four of these are still being monitored annually. The bad news is that the number of dormice at three of these sites has decreased despite an increase in monitoring effort (ie no. of boxes). We now have over 200 sites registered throughout the range of the dormouse over 40 counties across England and Wales. A huge thank you for all your hard work and here's to the next 20 years of monitoring.

This year we are increasing the number of sites within the monitoring programme still further. We have four new sites being monitored in Oxfordshire, up from only one registered site in the county last year, and this year's reintroduction is going to be in a woodland in Yorkshire, bringing the total number of known dormouse populations in the county to three.

Please let us know if you have any new sites to register and good luck with the box checks this year.

Best wishes
Nida Al Fulaij & Susan Sharafi
PTES

Contents

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The scientific work is based at Royal Holloway, University of London.

The Dormouse Monitor is compiled by Nida Al Fulaij & Susan Sharafi.

Cover image kindly provided by Hugh Clarke. Printed by NPL Printers on environmentally friendly paper.

Habitat management for wildlife

Grafham Water, owned by Anglian Water, is a man-made reservoir which was built to provide water to a large part of Cambridgeshire and the surrounding counties. It also has some 10 miles of footpath and cycle track around the waterline, making it a popular destination for a day out. Most of the reservoir and its shores are designated as a SSSI.

Following a meeting in 2000 between Sam Malt of the Grafham Wildlife and Conservation Group (GWCG) and Huntingdonshire Countryside Services, an initiative was put in place to use stretches of hedgerow, copses, spinneys and larger areas of woodland to link the Nature Reserve on the north-west shores of Grafham Water with Brampton Wood, another SSSI and the site of the first dormouse reintroduction, to the east. The objective is to enable dormice and other mammals to move easily across a wider area, gaining access to additional food sources and populating new areas.

The original link has now been completed, and GWCG are working on the southern side of the reservoir. There is a longer-term ambition to establish a complete 'woodland ring' around Grafham Water.

The local woodlands provide a range of habitats. Apart from West Wood (confusingly on the north side of Grafham Water) there is relatively little conifer. The majority of woodlands in the area consist of a mix of traditional native species such as oak, ash, hazel and hawthorn. Some of this was planted as landscaping when the reservoir was constructed, but most of it is far older: the village of Grafham is mentioned in the Domesday Book as a "woodland pasture 1 league long and 1 wide".

As in so many places, cost and manpower considerations mean that there has been relatively little woodland management for a good number of years. Since 1999 the GWCG volunteers, with assistance from the Community Payback Scheme, have been helping to rectify this. In West Wood conifers were felled to allow other species to regenerate, and hazel saplings were planted in some areas. Elsewhere, rides have been cleared or widened, dense undergrowth has been cleared to allow light to reach the woodland floor and hazel has been coppiced to encourage fresh growth.

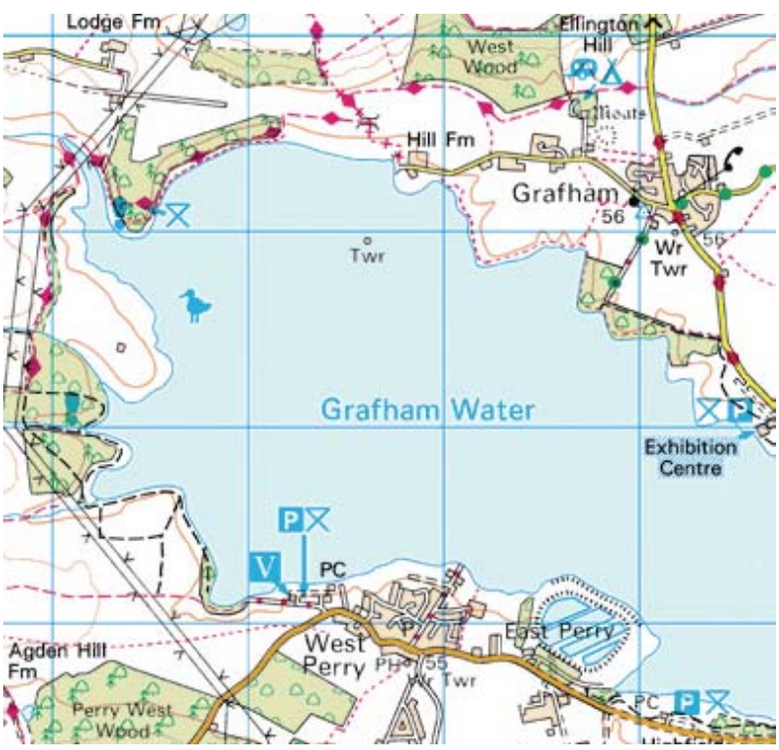
None of this would have been possible without the continued support of Huntingdonshire Countryside Services (the ancient county of Huntingdonshire is now a District within Cambridgeshire) and of a number of landowners, including farmers, Anglian Water and the Lord Lieutenant of Cambridgeshire (Mr Hugh Duberly CBE).

GWCG does not use bonfires to dispose of cuttings but instead, because muntjac deer are quite common, uses brash cuttings to protect hazel stools and give the regrowth a good start. Brash is also used to make 'habitat piles' to attract birds and mammals that nest at low levels. Heavier timber is cut and removed for domestic firewood.

GWCG is now discussing with PTES and the landowners the possibility of putting nest boxes in suitable areas of woodland.

Graham Shirra, Grafham Wildlife & Conservation Group

GWCG volunteers working in Perry West Wood (bottom left corner of the map).



Recolonising coppiced areas in new

A study carried out in Suffolk has shown that recolonisation of coppiced areas by dormice in Priestley Wood took place in the third summer after winter coppicing. The project's objective was to determine how soon after coppicing dormice would begin to build nests in an area.

This SSSI wood consists mainly of hazel and ash, together with oak, beech, small leaf lime, crab apple and cherry. Coppicing restarted in 1998 and has continued annually since then on a 20-year rotation. Dormice were reintroduced into this wood in 2000.

Due to the fact that there is little horizontal tree growth in newly coppiced areas, a vertical lightweight tube was designed. The tubes were installed in part of the wood that is not managed and with a poor shrub layer. In addition no other types of tubes or boxes were used within 300m. Test results from the field trial showed that 71% of these vertical tubes contained a nest after one year.

These new tubes were installed at the beginning of 2007 (25 tubes per hectare) to areas of regrowth and saplings coppiced in the winters between 2001 and 2005.

The second summer after coppicing the tree regrowth was up to 1.8m high and ground cover was approximately 30cm tall and covered about 50% of the ground. This cover consisted mainly of bramble, but with a good diversity of other ground plants. In the third summer after coppicing the ground cover was a minimum of 30cm tall over 100% of the ground. The tree regrowth and saplings were 2-3m tall.

We were pleased that the results of this study showed that dormice built nests in all coppiced areas after two summers of regrowth and not as long as the 6–7 years generally advocated.

The number of tubes containing nests per hectare remained at 40% for all coppiced area up to six years old. It was noted that there are more nests per 50 tubes (40%) in the recently coppiced areas compared to 50 boxes (13%) used in the National Dormouse Monitoring Programme.

This suggests that dormice prefer the newer growth areas, then translocate to the mature hazel areas in the autumn for the nuts or to breed. In 2007 we had early May litters and late summer litters both of which were found in areas adjacent to the coppiced coupes under study.

The coppicing carried out in this wood is not that as recommended in *The Dormouse Conservation Handbook*. However, by following certain coppicing rules (detailed below) keeping dormice numbers high has been very successful and numbers are increasing as more of the wood comes under management.

The dormice have spread to other woods nearby (although this cannot be proved scientifically as no DNA of the originally released animals was taken). However they do have white tips to their tails, which is uncommon in Suffolk's natural populations.

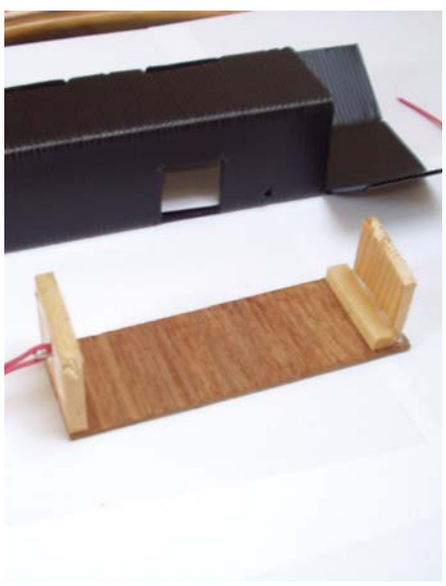
Rules for coppicing are:-

1. Keep tree bridges at least every 100m.
2. At ride crossings leave a tree at each corner.
3. Coppiced areas should have at least two sides connected to the remaining wood.
4. Leave selected trees/ bushes within the coppiced area.
5. Fence newly coppiced areas until deer management has been underway for two years to protect the new growth.
6. Only use hand tools for coppicing.

It would be interesting if similar projects could be undertaken in other parts of the country. The tubes cost about £1 each and I would be happy to collate the information from other sites. If you are interested in taking part, please e-mail enquiries@hazeldormouse.org.uk.

Alan Rogers, Essex and Suffolk Dormouse Project

Specially constructed nest tubes were designed to sit on vertical stands of coppiced hazel.



ALAN ROGERS

...dormouse tubes

The new vertical dormouse tube is for use in newly coppiced areas or where there are few horizontal branches.

Testing of the tube consisted of placing seven tubes in the wood at least 300 metres from other dormouse tubes and boxes. These were left from May until December 2007. The results showed that five tubes had nests, one tube remained empty and one tube was found on the ground with no nest. ie a 71% success rate.

The plastic tube is a modified Mammal Society type, which has been cut across three sides at a point just greater than the width of the tube. Two of the flaps have been removed so that three sides remain to form the top end roof of the tube. The wooden insert was cut to the correct length and a top wooden end added. A staple is used in the bottom for securing wire.

It is important that the top securing wire is below the top wooden batten (inside the tube) as it is passed through the holes in the plastic tube sides and then round the back of the tube.

Stands of hazel pollarded at waist to head height are much less susceptible to deer browsing.

Pollarding hazel

Browsing suppresses regeneration and prevents fruiting and flowering of shrubs. It is normally highly unsatisfactory for many reasons, not just dormouse conservation. Browsing animals (pigs, sheep and cattle) should always be excluded from woods with dormice, particularly in winter.

Evidence of browsers comes in the form of tightly nibbled twigs and coppice stools, small piles of spherical or oval black droppings and cloven-hoofed footprints in mud. In the absence of domestic stock, deer are likely to be the main animals involved and they are a widespread and increasing problem in woodlands throughout much of England and Wales. Where they occur in substantial numbers, the woodland floor may become devoid of many species and have few regenerating seedlings (or none at all). Often there is a lower 'browse line' visible on the trees in summer and the site begins to look very open as the understorey is progressively removed or suppressed. Deer should be taken into account when planning woodland management as it may well prejudice the entire future woodland structure and composition. Fallow deer are a particular problem as they usually occur in groups, increasing their impact on small areas. Roe and muntjac deer tend to be more scattered, occurring usually only as individuals or family groups.

When patches of hazel are cut, the regrowth will be very attractive to deer. Their browsing may then severely retard growth of the hazel stools. Scattered coppicing may reduce the total loss to deer and will anyway create a better mosaic habitat for dormice. Cutting very large patches is said to reduce deer damage, but may eventually attract more of them! Large patches are bad for dormice, as big areas are created which remain relatively unsuitable for dormice until the hazel has matured sufficiently to produce nuts again.

Pollarding is one of the ways to prevent damage by deer. Hazels can be pollarded about 1.5m above the ground, so that regrowth is mostly out of reach of deer (and rabbits). Pollarding results in shorter coppice poles, but this does not matter where the poles are not being harvested commercially. Pollarded hazels seem to fruit again sooner than if the stools are coppiced at ground level, helping to reduce the period when the cut hazels are providing little or no food for dormice. However, pollarding requires awkward and potentially dangerous actions at shoulder height using a chain saw or axe. Pollarded haels also regrow into a form different from traditional coppice stools. This may be undesirable for aesthetic reasons, particularly in woods where public access and scenic considerations are paramount, although pollarding was a common and sustainable component of woodland management for many centuries.

If you have tried pollarding in your woodland and have any positive or negative outcomes to report please email Susan@ptes.org.

Where dormice nest in hedges

Occasionally in the past I have found hazel dormouse nests in the hedgerows of our farm in Devon, but in 2007 they seemed unusually plentiful. By dint of careful searching, I found over 50 and a few more in hedges on neighbouring land. This has given me the chance to discover where, within hedge,s dormice choose to nest under natural conditions, and to reach some conclusions about what management favours nest building.

The farm is on the heavy clays of the Culm Measures in the northern half of Devon, within sight of Dartmoor. The landscape is one of small, irregular, grass fields grazed by cattle and sheep, separated by hedges with frequent mature trees, and interspersed with small, mainly secondary, broad-leaved woodlands. Fields typically range in size between 2ha and 10ha. Our hedges are set on banks as is typical of the West Country. Most are ancient and all are species-rich with 5 to 12 woody species per 30m (average 8.8). Hazel, grey willow and blackthorn are the most frequent shrubs, followed by oak, hawthorn and downy birch.

The structure of hedgerows on the farm and nearby is very varied reflecting past and current management. At one extreme there are hedgerows which are kept low and dense by cutting to a height of 1-2m every year, while at the other extreme there are those that have received no management for decades and are now lines of trees. Some hedgerows have, over the last 15 years, been cut at intervals of between two and six years. Others have been rejuvenated by laying within the same time frame. Bramble margins up to 5m wide have been allowed to develop alongside some hedgerows, whilst grazing pressure or mowing has prevented any such marginal growth beside others. All the hedgerows are in favourable condition for biodiversity (Hedgerow Survey Handbook, 2nd edition, Defra, 2008).

I found the nests by searching in the autumn, between September and December. As the leaves fall from the shrubs, and the nests' protective camouflage fails, they can be fairly easy to spot, although autumn-built shelter nests are more difficult. One such nest, which I only found by great good fortune, was in the drooping and browning top of a creeping thistle stem. Nests are cunningly disguised by the incorporation of leaves from nearby plants into the outermost layer, and this one was no exception being covered with thistle leaves - I only took a closer look very much on the off-chance. Fortunately a dormouse was still in occupation, so I was able to confirm ownership. I have yet to find a nest in the summer: the selection by dormice of dense vegetation and the use of green leaves cut from surrounding plants must make nests blend into their surroundings extremely well. Also, I have yet to find a hibernation nest despite examining many hollows in amongst the bases of trees and shrubs when laying hedges. I suspect they go underground, well into the banks.

The majority, over 60%, of nests have been within 1m of the ground, and none higher than 3m even though many hedges on the farm are much taller than this. It is possible that some nests are built in natural cavities in mature hedgerows trees, out of my sight, but even in lines of trees I have found nests low down at the base of the hedgerows. The lowest nests are within grass and rush tussocks, although these nests are always supported by bramble or rose stems. Such low nests are constructed of woven grass and rush blades with just a few bramble or other such leaves incorporated into the outer layers. Nests higher up in the hedge usually have more tree, shrub or bramble leaves: in breeding nests these can be layered 12 deep forming a watertight covering, important in an area with such high rainfall as ours. The relative

ALL IMAGES ROB WOLTON

...continued

proportion of dicot leaves to monocot leaves used in nest construction varies considerably: honeysuckle bark is only occasionally used on our farm. Nearly all the nests I have found have been supported by ramblers like bramble or field rose or by shrubs – the one in the creeping thistle was an exception, as were the few I found in bracken or on top of fencing wire.

How hedgerows are managed has a considerable impact on where dormice choose to nest within them. Where hedges have not been cut at all within the last six years, the majority of nests (68%) I found were in bramble or rose margins with very few in shrubs other than holly. In sharp contrast, in hedges that have been cut within the last six years, although many nests were still in bramble or rose margins, the majority (61%) were within the main body of the hedgerow itself, supported by shrubs.

Looking more closely at where dormice choose to nest within shrubs in cut hedgerows, over 80% of nests were in the cut line, where stems are densely branched as a result of flailing. The rest, with just one or two exceptions, were either in low suckering growth or part way up one or two year old growth above the cut line. The dormice showed a strong preference for blackthorn, with 60% of nests being supported by this shrub, followed by holly and just a few in sallows and hawthorn. No nests were found in hazel despite it being the most abundant shrub.

Nests in the dense multiple forks created by flail cutting must surely be well protected from predators such as magpies and even grey squirrels, especially when in such a thorny plant as blackthorn. No such secure nesting sites occur in hedges that have not been cut for many years: even though these hedges may be much larger than cut ones, the growth is simply too sparse, too open and exposed. Unless uncut hedges have bramble or rose margins, or at least a few dense holly or gorse bushes, I suspect that they are inhospitable to dormice. This perhaps explains why dormice have been found to use nest boxes and tubes far more often in high hedges than in short ones – it's not necessarily that high hedges have higher populations (the usual assumption), just that they don't have any good natural nesting sites so nest boxes and tubes are the only choice. A number of researchers, including Sue and Roy Eden in Dorset, looking at similar habitats such as scrub and woodland edges have suggested that dormice may prefer to build nests in the open rather than use hollows, whether natural or artificial, perhaps because they are less vulnerable when in open-built nests to predators like weasels and even wood mice.

Contrary to received wisdom, my observations suggest that occasional cutting of hedgerows is highly beneficial to dormice. Cutting a proportion of the hedgerow length within a network, perhaps a half, every three to six years, will help to ensure that safe nesting sites are available. I have found nests, including ones of breeding size, in hedges that are cut every year, but cutting on a three year rotation will create better feeding conditions by encouraging flowering and fruiting. The remaining lengths of hedgerow should be allowed to become tall and wide before being cut back or layed. Where hedges are not cut, the development of broad bramble and rose margins should be strongly encouraged. If our farm here in Devon is anything to go by, then encouraging a wide, intimate, diversity of hedgerow structure and dimension is likely to be much appreciated by dormice.

Rob Wolton
Locks Park Farm, Devon.
robertwolton@yahoo.co.uk

Going nuts for bird feeders?

Is there a design for dormouse-proof birdfeeders? In 2004 Devon Biodiversity Records Centre (DBRC) was contacted by a private householder in Tiverton with this unusual, enviable, problem. A crack team of daring dormice would perform a raid on a hanging nut feeder, then eat so much that the food level dropped below the entrance holes, trapping the dormice inside. It was becoming slightly tiresome, in a charming sort of way, having to release them from the feeder several times a week. These visits have continued each year, regardless of each new birdfeeder design innovation; so far the dormice have been up to every challenge.

Curiosity aroused we decided to conduct a preliminary survey to find out more. Occasional dormouse records pop up from time to time in gardens. Recent examples are known from Chilworth and Petersfield in Hampshire, Dorset, Worcestershire, East Grinstead in Kent, Carmarthanshire and Usk Valley in Wales. We wondered how widespread this behaviour might be, and if it might be increasing, for some reason, in Devon.

Uncommon or garden

As well as following up incidental records, survey cards were distributed and each record verified, usually by photo. We also delved into historical literature for past clues. Presently there are 20 gardens in Devon where dormice have, or still do, use birdfeeders. Apart from gardens our categories soon expanded to take in other human habitations as well (see map). The picture is intriguing. Home and garden reports emanate from all over the county, from upland Dartmoor to lowland coastal areas, during day and night, and at all times of year, featuring some well-fed looking diurnal winter dormice.

We're not sure how surprised we should be. Dormice are not unknown in gardens. Devon is blessed with an abundant dormouse population and it's perhaps understandable, especially if gardens are near to woodland or connected by hedges, that the prospect of a nutty bounty (or 'snickers'?) proves irresistible. Often gardens are close to woods or ancient hedgerows – but not always: some have been in the middle of towns. And in a number of cases, once dormice have discovered the proverbial free lunch, they return each year, occasionally apparently bringing the family.

Best laid plans

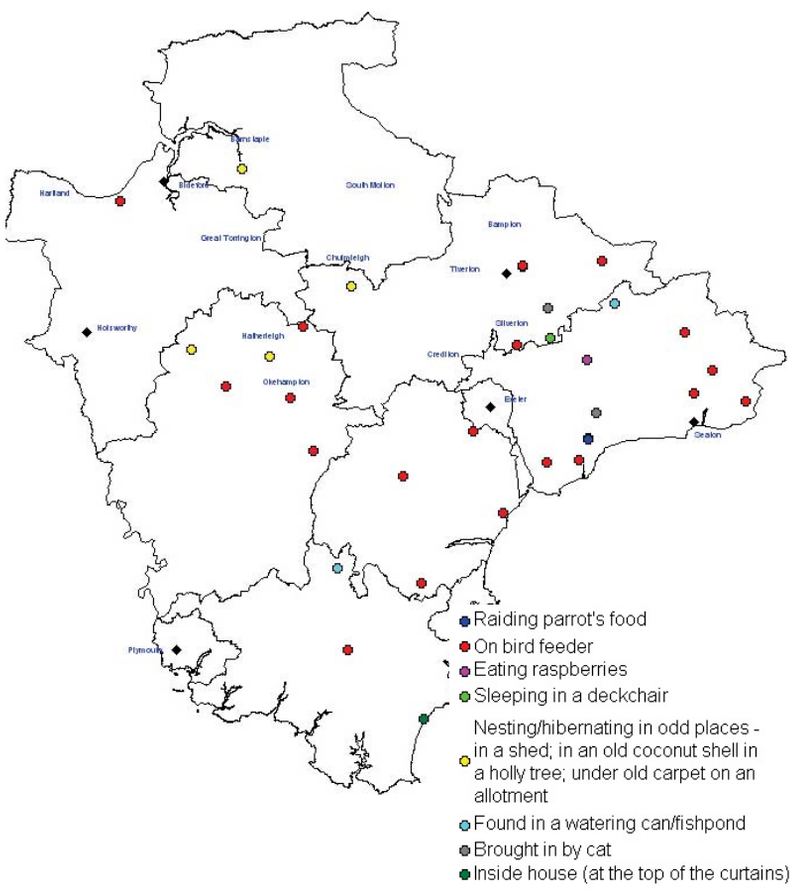
Aside from several additional anecdotal and historical records the first of the recent reports dates from the 1990s. The interesting questions for us now are why dormice might be going out of their way to use some gardens, how new or common this behaviour might be, and if it might be increasing. Following the initial survey we plan to:

• analyse whether gardens with dormice are linked to good systems of hedges and surrounding habitat – which would be further evidence of the value of landscape wildlife corridors and show how far dormice might travel for food,
• see if dormice might be visiting gardens because of a shortage of natural food, nest sites or other resource in the wider environment (perhaps due to climatic conditions or population density?),
• continue researching county historical records, former distributions and receiving current garden records.

Please send any garden records to: Ellie Bremner, Jacqui West & Stephen Carroll, DBRC, c/o Exeter Central Library Castle Street, Exeter EX4 3PQ Tel. 01392 274128

Or email dbrc@devonwildlifetrust.org or sc353@exeter.ac.uk

Stephen Carroll



The 7th International Dormouse Conference

The 7th International Dormouse Conference will be hosted by The Mammal Society and held in Somerset between 25 and 30 September 2008. The conference will be in Cheddar and Shipham in Somerset about 35km south of Bristol and 20km from Bristol International Airport.

The provisional programme is as follows:

25 September	Arrive and register at Shipham near Cheddar Somerset. Evening drinks/ meal and informal party.
26 September	Full day of lectures at Shipham near Cheddar.
27 September	Coach trip to Exeter University for Devon Mammal Group's regional conference about dormice.
28 September	Fieldtrip in Cheddar area to look at various dormouse projects.
29 September	Full day of lectures at Shipham near Cheddar. Farewell meal in the evening.
30 September	Depart. Post-conference excursion to Tring and Whipsnade area.
I October	Visit to edible dormouse research project.

Accommodation of various standards and costs is available locally - there are camp sites, hostel accommodation and a range of houses offering bed and breakfast. Minimum costs are likely to be around US$50 per day, plus travel and conference fee. Sponsorship of the conference may be available to help students and those coming from non-EU countries or those countries that have recently joined the EU. Further details will be sent to those who register in response. If you wish to register please send your name address and email to:

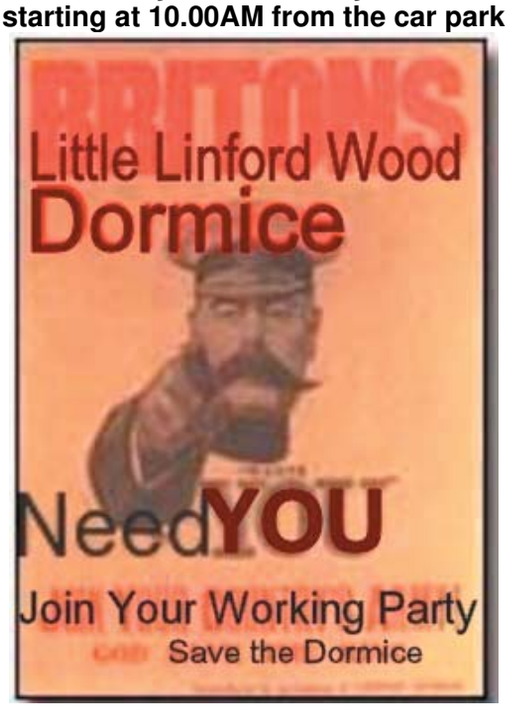
Michael Woods, The Mammal Society, c/o Overlea, Crickham, Wedmore, Somerset, S284 JZ
Tel: 01934 712500 or email: mwoods@mammal.org.uk

PAT MORRIS

Little Linford Wood management work

The southern edge of Hanger Quarter highlighted in pink is where the work is being carried out.

Work Party - Coppicing for Dormice Expansion
Little Linford Wood
Sunday 10th February 2008
starting at 10.00AM from the car park



Little Linford Wood, in Buckinghamshire, was the site of the 1998 dormouse reintroduction where 41 dormice were released.

In 1986 a large area had been clear-felled and then replanted a couple of years later. The dormice came after 10 years of regrowth had provided them with an ideal habitat to colonise. In 2002 we started a 30-year coppice cycle, using pollarding on the hazel to reduce the effects of browsing by deer. As well as pollarding the hazel at between 0.5-1m, we have also been using the felled branches to create dead hedges around the coppiced areas. This has been very successful at reducing the browsing on the hazel regrowth from muntjac deer. There have been no detrimental effects on the hazel so far, which has grown back very effectively. In fact it has been remarked that in some cases the coppiced areas along the edges of the rides have regrown too quickly, not giving the field layer of flowering plants very long to grow. This year we have started further work to improve our woodland edges. We have coppiced a strip along the edge to let the light in and have done some hedge laying. To ensure a richer diversity of species next winter we hope to plant a row of shrubs to form a thick mixed hedge along the edge of the wood. This could contain hawthorn, blackthorn, hazel, field maple, dog rose, guelder rose and bramble. By encouraging a thick hedge to grow along the edge we hope to provide a suitable habitat corridor for the dormice to spread out of the wood.

Paul Manchester


Paul Manchester & John Prince called for volunteers to help carry out coppicing work and hedge laying at Little Linford.

CAROL WATTS

Dead dormice - bodies wanted

The main reason for carrying out post mortem examinations on free living dormice is to gather valuable information on disease threats to dormice and to detect emerging infectious diseases should they occur.

The following samples and information will also be collected and stored for future analysis:
- The cause of death and subclinical diseases, if present
- The parasite burden related to sex and age
- Data on the area, habitat and circumstances in which the dormouse was found
- The transponder number, if present, and hence the origin of the dormouse
- Data on body measurements, condition score and body weight, leading to an assessment of the condition of the dormouse at the time of year it is found
- Serum samples for retrospective studies on virus infection
- Teeth and eyes for future ageing studies
- Information on any zoonotic infections harboured by dormice, enabling assessment of the health risks to dormouse workers and implementation of necessary protective measures

When submitting dead dormice for post-mortem please provide the following data if possible:
- Name and contact details of the finder
- National grid reference and/or address of the site where the dormouse was found
- Habitat type the dormouse was found in eg hedgerow, deciduous woodland, garden or, in case of captive dormice, conditions under which it had been kept
- Events surrounding the death, if known, eg brought in by a cat, found dead in a nest box with newly born young, extreme weather conditions, evidence of predators in vicinity
- Any other information known about the dormouse that might be relevant

How to send your dormouse:
- Wrap the dormouse in kitchen paper or cotton wool
- Put the wrapped dormouse in two securely sealed plastic bags
- Place the bagged dormouse in a cardboard roll to prevent crushing during postage
- Put an ice pack or ice in a sealed plastic bag around the dormouse and wrap absorbent tissue around it
- Put in a box/ envelope marked "PATHOLOGICAL SPECIMEN. HANDLE WITH CARE"
- Address to "Dormouse post mortems", Ghislaine Sayers, Paignton Zoo, Totnes Road, Paignton, Devon TQ4 7EU
- Send as "next day guaranteed delivery" to arrive on a weekday
- Refrigerate your dormouse if there is a delay before posting

PAT MORRIS

Monitor's news

MIDGER WOOD MONITOR'S PARTY

Pam Woodbridge celebrated her 80th birthday at the November box check of Midger Wood in Gloucestershire with Dora Clarke and a group of other dormouse monitors. She and Dora have been monitoring the wood since 1994. They found a total of 20 dormice there last year over the course of eight visits.

DEVON DORMOUSE CHECK

Last October a group of eleven dormouse enthusiasts visited Andrew's Wood in the South Hams to carry out a box check, led by Jackie Gage of Devon Wildlife Trust. They found

five dormice and 20 nests - a great start to a day which continued with a visit to Moorgate on Dartmoor. This is where Elaine Hurrell and her father made the crucial discovery, whilst watching dormice feeding every night, that the animals' teeth marks on hazelnuts were distinctive enough to enable them to idenfity which species are present.

SUSSEX VOLUNTEERS WANTED

The Woodland Trust is looking for licence holders in Sussex to help monitor their sites, including Lake Wood (20.85 acres), Views Wood (61.26 acres) both in Uckfield, Costells Wood (51.99 acres) in Scaynes Hill, Hargate Forest (152.4 acres) in Tunbridge Wells and Brede High Woods near Battle (650 acres). If you are interested please contact Sandy Williamson, Woodland Officer (Sussex), on 01342 833932.

DORMOUSE TRAINING DAY

How to Manage Woods for Dormice, taught by Dr Pat Morris, will be held on Tuesday 7 October at Hallsannery Field Centre, Bideford, Devon & Thursday 30 October at Scotney Castle, Lamberhurst, Kent. The cost is £50 (£45 for dormouse monitors submitting data to the NDMP). For further details and a booking form contact susan@ptes.org or call Susan on 020 7498 4533. Please indicate which date and location you are interested in.

DORMOUSE FORUM: SNORING DORMOUSE?

I was checking nest boxes today (20 Feb 2008) in Somerset that had not been checked since 2006. In 36 boxes we found six dormouse nests, from one of which there came a high pitched squeaky breathing sound. I've heard that dormice are known to snore. Could this have been one? The nest was a very tightly woven ball but I could not find an obvious entrance. It was constructed on top of an old tit's nest. We decided to put everything back as we found it without investigating any further. Has anyone got any other ideas or thoughts?

Sounds (!) to me like you have a hibernating dormouse. The two winter nests I've seen were cricket ball-sized with no apparent entrance. I can't hear the snoring, but younger assistants have reported hearing snoring from boxes (in summer) several feet away. I squeezed the winter nests and got a squeak (a bit like a dog's toy), but I don't recommend you return to try it!

Thank you. The nest was just as you described. It was a fantastic experience listening to it. I hope we didn't disturb the dormouse enough to bring it out of its slumberings prematurely.

Whilst cleaning out boxes in February, my colleague and I found a torpid dormouse, curled up in an old nest which was active last year. No snoring though!

Did the nest have a definite opening to it? I understand that hibernating dormice seal themselves into their hibernation nests. What part of the country were you checking in? The hibernating dormouse we found was in a hazel/oak/ash wood at about 225m elevation.

The nest was rather 'loose' and we are pretty sure it wasn't a hibernation nest. As the dormouse was torpid last week, we had a quick check today (1 Mar 2008). Again it was torpid but there is now a definite entrance at the top of the nest, an indication that there has been some activity since last week. Our site is in Kent - at 76m.

It is interesting that because of slightly warmer weather conditions some dormice are already coming out of hibernation. Tina Donnelly, a member of the captive breeding group, currently has a number of old dormice (6 - 7 yrs). One male dormouse has not hibernated at all but continued feeding throughout the winter. Is this because its metabolism isn't capable of sustaining hibernation?

I think you are right about the dormice waking up too early because the weather has been so mild. I know that some other species are waking up too early such as great crested newts.

I think we worry too much about animals waking from hibernation earlier than we expect. Our native species have weathered far worse extremes than we are experiencing at the moment. Amphibians and reptiles can cope well with variations in winter temperatures and many species of bats emerge on mild nights throughout the winter for short feeding flights. Dormice have a problem with food availability if they wake early but can go into torpor if the weather gets cold again. Maybe their food sources are also available earlier, due to unseasonably warm weather.

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