Winter 2005

The Dormouse Monitor

Newsletter of the National Dormouse Monitoring Programme

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PEOPLE'S TRUST FOR ENDANGERED SPECIES
ZSL LIVING CONSERVATION
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Welcome

This year appears to have been a hard one for dormice. Many monitors have reported that their box checks in spring, throughout the summer and even into early autumn have yielded incredibly low numbers of animals, especially in comparison to the large numbers that were being seen last year. This could be due to the uncertain start to the summer. Dormice are very sensitive to cold and wet weather, especially in the early summer. Bad weather


Thames Water

at this time causes them to decrease the time they spend active as a way to save energy, thus delaying breeding. However, in the last few weeks, we have received reports of dormice numbers found in nest boxes being on the increase. We have experienced a similar pattern at our own monitoring site on the Isle of Wight. The June and September checks yielded significantly lower numbers than we usually experience but in October we were very happy to find numbers back up to those that we usually encounter. It will be very interesting to see how everyone got on this year so please don't forget to send in your recording forms. We will report back on this year's findings in the next issue of *The Dormouse Monitor*.

Yours sincerely

Jill Nelson
Chief Executive, PTES

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

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'Green bridge' in Kent

In May 2005 traffic began to flow under our first 'dormouse road bridge'. This is on the A21, London to Hastings road, as it forms the new Lamberhurst bypass in Kent. The village has desperately needed relief from all the heavy traffic for years, but their bypass was cancelled some time ago. When the scheme reappeared, the National Trust pressed for the construction of a 'green habitat bridge' on the approach to its property at Scotney Castle, in exchange for releasing the necessary land to build the bypass. The bridge itself looks elegant and


Pat Morris


Pat Morris

now has earthy banks and shrubs on top that allow you to drive down the lane to Scotney Castle gardens, over the 4 lane bypass, without even knowing it is there! This is a much more sensitive way to build roads than simply slashing a dual carriageway through the Garden of England. After all, the road will be there for decades to come so we might as well make a decent job of it now. It's so obviously the right thing to do. It's good for local people to be able to walk along the lane on top of the bridge, rather than risk a sprint across 4 lanes of heavy traffic in order to get from Lamberhurst to Scotney Castle and its woods.

The whole idea of this bridge began because there were dormice living on both sides of the old A21, but they were probably able to cross it because the road was so narrow. The new dual carriageway would be a barrier to dispersal for dormice and for many other species too. Creating a 'habitat bridge' will allow many creatures to cross the road safely and also reduce the isolation effect of the new road, a major cause of population fragmentation in many parts of Britain these days. I hope the dormice use it, although it's not in the best place for that, but even if they don't the bridge will


Pat Morris

be a valuable access route for deer, voles, reptiles and many other things that would cross the road at their peril and perhaps (in the case of deer) be a danger to traffic as well.

The Lamberhurst bridge is a civilised compromise between the need to improve roads for contemporary use and at the same time protect the environment from insensitive assaults on habitat integrity. Hopefully we will see others built elsewhere in picturesque places. There are habitat bridges in many Continental countries, and they do work. There is also a special bridge in Japan, specifically for dormice, with plans to build more. Why has it taken so long to get one built here?

Pat Morris

Green bridges offer a possible solution to the problem of habitat fragmentation.

Pat Morris

International dormouse conference

The 6th International Conference on Dormice was held in Poland in late September 2005. It was a stimulating meeting, not least because there were many young people attending, eager to carry the batons so to speak. There were 14 countries represented, from the UK to the Ukraine, from the Mediterranean to Latvia. It was a very friendly and constructive meeting. There were good papers too, including news that Italian dormice begin breeding in November and disappear (into “summer hibernation”) during the heat and dry of July and August, the exact reverse of what happens here. I was particularly pleased to see the many ideas that we pioneered in Britain being taken up elsewhere and used to good effect. However, nobody has yet managed to copy our National Dormouse Monitoring Programme, which is a European ‘first’.

Nida Al Fulaij

We heard about the ‘Saxony Nut Hunt’, modelled on ours of 1993, but with ingenious additions such as a story book to encourage children to go nut searching. The results show that *Muscardinus* has declined sharply in Saxony, and there are now plans to repeat this highly popular exercise in other parts of Germany. This is good too because, at a previous international meeting, I had been assured that Nutters going nut hunting might work with the Mad English, but not in Germany as the people there take things more seriously!

We had a couple of field excursions too, one to the famous Bialowieza Forest and another to a huge wetland area. We didn’t see any dormice, but the weather and scenery were particularly fine and we did see other interesting wildlife including elk, great grey shrike and also beaver and wolf signs.

The next International Dormouse Conference will be held in England, based in Somerset in 2008. This promises to be a good meeting and lots of British dormousers will be invited to meet their Continental counterparts and exchange ideas, information and useful addresses.

Pat Morris

Aristocratic new residence for dormice

This year we continued our long-term project to boost wild dormice populations. Thirty three hazel dormice, born and raised as part of the captive breeding programme, were released at a secret location on the Chatsworth Estate, the Derbyshire home of the Duke and Duchess of Devonshire. The release will hopefully continue to establish an expanding population of this charismatic species in the area. It is only the second known population of dormice in Derbyshire, the first being established during an earlier release in 2003, not far away.

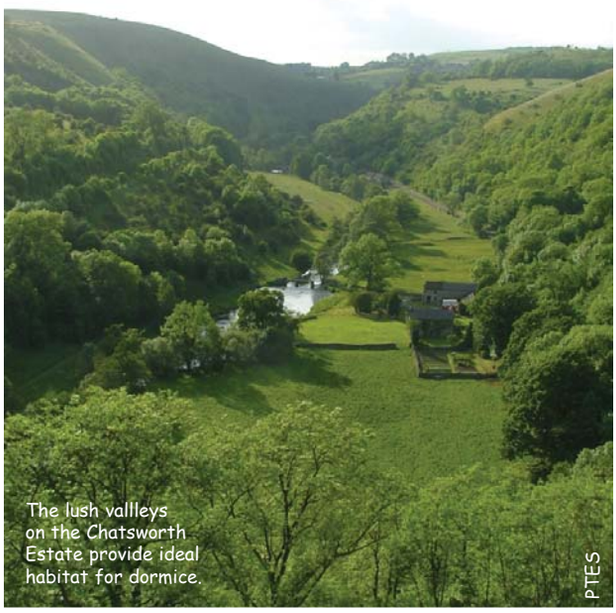
The dormice were paired up and placed in pre-release wire cages for two weeks to enable them to become accustomed to their new surroundings. Volunteers from Derbyshire, led by Dave Mallon, visited the cages every evening and kept the dormice well fed until their release into the wider countryside. Small holes were made at the top of the wire cages to allow them to explore their new environment as quickly or as slowly as they wished.

The Dormouse Species Recovery Programme has now been running for 12 years and has been responsible for reintroductions at fourteen sites in eleven counties, predominantly in the Midlands and North of England, where the species has become locally extinct or extremely rare over the last century.

Tony Mitchell-Jones, English Nature's mammal expert said: "We've been delighted with the success of this project. It's based on some excellent science and shows very clearly that dormice can thrive in lots of woods if only they can reach them."

The Dowager Duchess of Devonshire said: "Everyone at Chatsworth is thrilled that the dormouse release took place on the Estate and we hope that this carefully planned and monitored exercise will play a small but significant part in reversing the decline in dormouse numbers in the UK."

The first box check at the site in October revealed only one dormouse - though plenty more nests were found. We will have to wait until next year to find out how well the population is doing



The lush vallleys on the Chatsworth Estate provide ideal habitat for dormice.

PTES

Transylvanian dormouse project

The Balkans support a wide variety of species that are not found here in the UK. Romania plays host to four different species of dormice, including the hazel dormouse (our only native species) which is their most widely-distributed. Their other species are the garden (*Eliomys quercinus)*, forest or tree (*Dryomys nitedula)* and edible (*Glis glis*) dormice.


Pat Morris

Garden dormice sport a bandit-like mask.

The garden dormouse is considered rare and endangered. Forest dormice seem to have a larger distribution, but they are also considered rare and endangered for Romanian fauna. Hazel dormice are the best represented throughout Romania, but still considered a rare mammal. The edible dormice is also classified as rare and vulnerable. All four species are proposed for inclusion in the Red Data Book of Threatened Species of Romania and all need protection.


Eliana Sevianu

200 nest boxes have been constructed and erected in different woodland types.

Very little is known about the dormice in this area and PTES was contacted by Eliana Sevianu for help in finding out more about where they are found and how many there are. Eliana is hoping to develop a long-term conservation programme for all four dormice species present in the central Transylvanian Plain. By setting up a monitoring programme, similar to our one here in the UK, she will be able to obtain up-to-date information about each of the species.

Initially Eliana and her colleagues will be constructing dormouse nest boxes and putting them up in various forests and different habitats throughout the region. They will then monitor them over the course of two years, hopefully determining which habitat each species prefers, as well as working out where they are and how numerous each one is.

The Transylvanian Plain is a lowland area that has a relatively high human population. The impacts they have had on the area are similar to the problems faced by wildlife in our country – in particular habitat fragmentation. Part of the long-term aspect of this conservation work will be to relink areas that have been divided.


Forest dormice are rare across their range due to destruction of their woodland habitat.

Pat Morris

Once Eliana and her colleagues have mapped the dormice throughout the region they will carry out an educational programme to let landowners and forest authorities know that endangered species are present and need protecting. They can then include dormice requirements in their management plans.


Zoe Greenwood

The Disappearing Dormouse by Ruth Tomalin

(First published in Country Life - December 14, 1945)

Conkers, mushrooms, bright red berries - these are the images conjured up when autumn is mentioned. But one sight, familiar in years gone by, is all too often missing today. Where are the dormice?

Fifteen years ago one could wander down a country lane in October and easily find half a dozen round nests, the size of a cricket ball, woven neatly into hedgerows. A gentle knock at the briar or bramble and a soft yellow nose would be thrust out of the wall - the nests having no obvious entrance. The sleek, harvest-fattened dormouse would usually climb halfway out of the nest and then pause to listen. This gave the observer time to note the honey-blonde fur, long downy tail and eyes as bright as lily-seeds.

My first encounter with a dormouse happened on a stormy day one March, when snow lay in gentle drifts over the early daffodils. Curled in a tight ball, cold and still, the dormouse appeared utterly lifeless. Only the whistling snore, which had guided me to his nest, assured me that he was really alive. The storm did not bother him and handling did not waken him. I kept the dormouse in a cool outhouse so that artificial heat should not wake him too soon.


Rhys Owen-Roberts

The spring was late and cold that year and it was not until the second week of May that my dormouse uncurled himself. Once he awoke fully I carried him back to the woods to set him free. Climbing lazily into the bramble bush wherein I had placed his cage, he nipped off a young shoot with a succulent stem and pale green leaves. This he devoured whilst holding it in both paws. I tasted a shoot myself - it was sweet and juicy and the thorns were still soft.

One morning, the following autumn, I found another nest deep within a wild rosebush. Inside there lay another sleepy dormouse which made no attempt to run away.


Susan Sharafi

Deciding that her winter sleep must have begun, I carried the nest home to place inside the outhouse. I soon discovered that the dormouse had just produced four young ones. Would a family born so late in the year survive? I picked up the cage to take them back to the woods but could not resist the temptation to put in a cautious finger and stroke one of the tiny, blind youngsters - the smallest animals I had ever seen. At this final provocation even the gentle temper of a dormouse reached snapping point. I pulled my finger from the nest with the little mother swinging from it, her white teeth fixed in a ferocious bite.

Soon the mother, her family and I were on our way to the woods again. The young mother was feeding on a meal of hazel kernels and had a bundle of fine hay in which to keep her young ones warm. I placed the cage under the same rosebush with the door ajar. A week later I revisited in the hope of finding the dormouse family still in their cage. Ducking under the brambles, I looked into the cage and saw - nothing! The floor has been swept clean, not a shred of the nest, not a scrap of hay remained. As I stood upright I found myself looking at a new dormouse nest. It was made not of the coarse sedge-grasses of the woods but of fine meadow hay. I gently shook the bush and a dormouse poked its head out! It was the little mother. I spent the following few weeks watching four agile youngsters growing up.

Since I first held the sleepy dormouse in my hand I have had no doubt that this is the most beautiful and captivating of English wild animals. It is saddening therefore, to find that my small catkin-coloured friends have disappeared from familiar woods and lanes, and that children today will not enjoy the keen pleasure I had in watching them. For dormice, like their relatives the red squirrels, have become rare in the wider countryside.

60 years on from the time that this article was written we have even fewer dormice in our hedgerows and woodlands. We are making every effort to restore this wonderful creature to its former range. Thank you for all your help in this work.

Hibernating dormice

In Britain dormice spend about half the year in hibernation, from October until May. During this time they are inactive and on the ground, in complete contrast to the rest of the year. This change in behaviour occurs about the time of the first frosts in autumn and is brought about by the need to save energy at a time of year when food is not available. To support their continued survival, the animals rely upon fat reserves accumulated during the autumn when food was abundant. Like hibernating bats, during the winter dormice consume fat reserves equivalent to about a quarter of their pre-hibernation body weight. This means that dormice need to weigh at least 12-15g before hibernation in order to be fat enough to survive the winter. Adult dormice often hibernate at body weights greater than 30g, having put on weight at remarkable speed during the autumn. Sometimes their weight doubles in less than a month, especially when the weather is fine and there are plenty of nuts available in the trees.

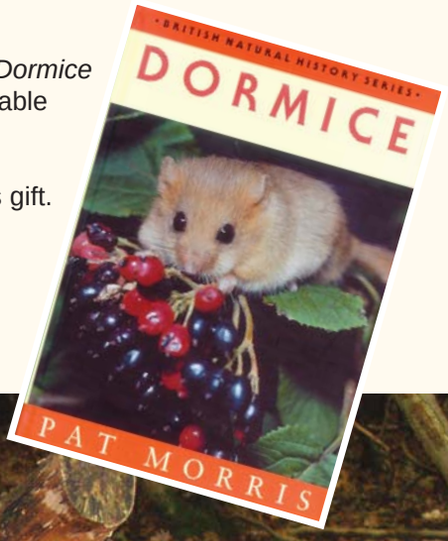
Radio tracking dormice in the autumn has revealed that most nest under moss or loose leaf litter on the woodland floor and underneath log piles. They make a tightly woven fibrous nest, about the size of a tennis ball, on the surface of the ground or in a small depression. Suitable places are probably available in most woodlands and are unlikely to be a limiting factor, but on the ground the hibernating animals become very vulnerable to floods, trampling and predation.

It may seem pretty daft to hibernate in such vulnerable places, but there are significant advantages to hibernating on or under the ground. In particular, the air here is always moist, reducing water loss by the hibernating animals. If they used drier places, the dormice would need to wake up and drink in order to avoid becoming dangerously dehydrated. Waking up reduces fat reserves and increases the risk of predation if the animals come out into the open. Another advantage of hibernating on the ground is that the temperature there is low and fairly constant.

Kate Merry

Hibernation is a strategy to overcome the problems posed by lack of food in the winter, but it subjects the dormouse to significant physiological challenges. Longer winters, higher and variable temperatures all add to the problems. When fat reserves are used up faster dormouse survival will be less likely, especially among small individuals. It is likely that these effects result in poorer survival in the north of England compared with the south, and in the west compared with the east. Although habitats are better in the west, the climate is not so good.

Extract taken from *Dormice* by Pat Morris. Available from Whittet Books Tel:01449 781877. A perfect Christmas gift.



Log piles left in woodlands provide ideal hibernation sites for dormice.

Nida Al Fulaij

Monitor's news and questions

2005 Records
Please send in your records, whether you found dormice or not, as soon as you can to: Susan Sharafi, PTES, 15 Cloisters House, 8 Battersea Park Road, London, SW8 4BG. You may also e-mail them back to susan@ptes.org or you can enter your records yourself online. Please visit http://www.speciesdata.co.uk/dorhold.htm

Dave Barker, Woodland & Conservation Warden, The Dartington Hall Trust wrote to us asking, "Have you had any feedback from nest box monitors with regards to dormouse abundance during this year's monthly checks? Here in South Devon at the two sites that we are monitoring - two different locations with different habitat - we are experiencing low numbers of dormice and in some months not a single one is turning up. Is this a local phenomenon or are you getting other people saying they are experiencing the same? Is this due to the bad weather we had earlier this year and the late spring and summer?"

Mark Rawlins, Cumbria, also had similar queries, writing to ask, "Are dormouse numbers high or low this year? Whilst April, May and June looked promising here at Roudsea, the last three months have been the worst in five years, producing a total of just five animals.The same periods in 2001, 2002, 2003 and 2004 produced 20, 26, 47 and 23 dormice respectively (last summer was very wet). The weather here has not been brilliant. We have had heavy rain, high winds and cold weather, but not necessarily for prolonged periods. On occasions it has been warm and sunny. Is the weather affecting their numbers? John Webster, formerly of the Duddon Valley scheme, suggested last year that the scent of wood mice can put the dormice off using the boxes. Whilst 2004 was a bumper year for wood mice (they out numbered dormice for the first time) this year has been 'normal' with relatively low wood mice numbers. Has anyone any further evidence of dormice being affected by wood mice numbers?"

Dr Pat Morris & Dr Paul Bright replied:
"This is exactly why we need a national monitoring system, to see if such observations are nationwide or just local. We also need to see how some years compare with others. This will be possible when all the 2005 results are in and we will report back in the next *Dormouse Monitor*.

This has been a fairly dry summer and in the past we have noticed that the dormice often don't use the nestboxes as much in the summer months but return to them when the weather worsens in autumn. A late spring/ summer can also affect the dormice. The lack of food means that they are less active and spend significantly more time in summer torpor which delays breeding.

There is some evidence that occupancy by yellow-necked mice affects use by dormice, but this would not be an issue in Cumbria. Many sites do not seem to have wood mice using their boxes, whilst some find many. With the records you have been sending back regarding other species in boxes we will be able to look at the data and have some answers for you in the next *Dormouse Monitor*. Again, this is what regular monitoring is all about. By collecting data using a structured system that allows comparsion between sites, we are in a better position to answer these kind of questions."

If you have any questions or news that you would like to share please e-mail us on enquiries@ptes.org


Rhys Owen-Roberts