

Dormouse Nest Cartons

(by Martin Anderson and Norman Dale)

The dormouse nest tubes developed by Morris et al. [1] are a versatile tool for surveying habitats where traditional nest boxes would be unsuitable. In an earlier article [2] we reported their use in establishing the presence of dormice in an area of heathland. Although the tubes can be purchased from The Mammal Society for £2 each, the cost deters some people when they realise they might need at least 30 tubes to obtain a reasonable amount of data per season. Since we started using tubes a few years ago, we have been searching for a cheaper alternative to the standard model which could be easily made from items of refuse. Our first trials with various plastic containers and lengths of pipe met with failure, but this year we have found a very effective adaptation of the ubiquitous 1 litre drink cartons which are thrown away in their thousands every day.

Five of these prototype nest cartons were installed in March in a gorse thicket in which we had found dormice with nest tubes last year. The cartons were checked monthly from April to November. The first nest appeared in August and two more appeared in September, one of which contained two juveniles. As we have found previously, the dormice nests in this heathy area consist of a mixture of dead bracken fronds and fine dry grass. The dormice clearly

approve of the cartons. They are by design completely waterproof and the presence of juveniles may indicate that there is enough room in them for the animals to breed.



Plate 1. Nest carton installed in gorse

The cartons can be made less conspicuous (and given added protection) by coating them with blackboard paint and are supported by thin wire loops, as with nest tubes (Plate 1).

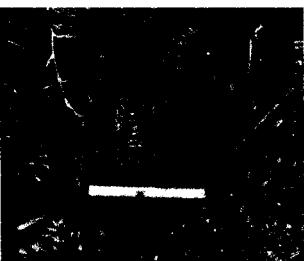


Plate 2. Carton with nest

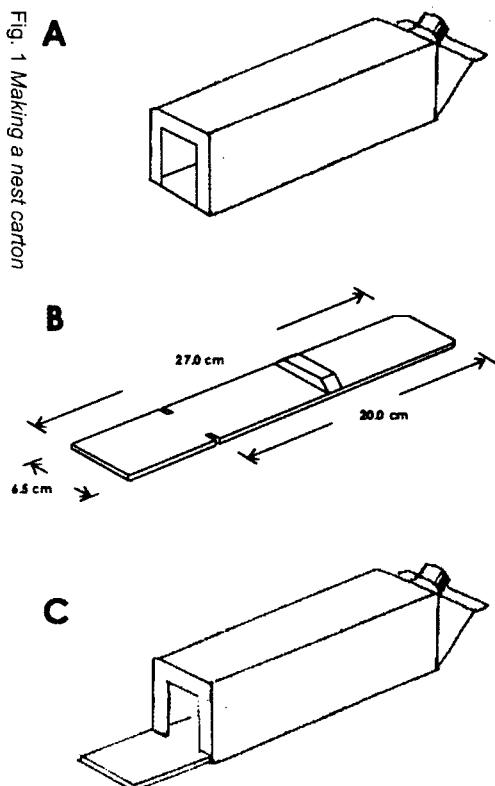
The method used to prepare the nest cartons is outlined in Fig 1. The first step is to cut a rectangular hole in the base of a dry empty drink carton leaving a 1 cm border on three sides (A). As will become apparent later, the hole must be no less than 6 cm x 5 cm in size. The next step is to prepare the 'floor board' (B).



Plate 3. Gorse thicket where the cartons were installed

Take a piece of plywood 27 cm x 6.5 cm in size and trim the corners at one end (this improves the fit of the end of the board against the top of the carton). Next, cut a notch on either side of the board about 20 cm from the bevelled end. (The dimensions of cartons can vary slightly so it is advisable to check where the notches need to be by standing the carton on the board).

Fig. 1 Making a nest carton



The notches need to be 1 cm long and 0.2 cm wide. Finally, glue a small 'step' about half-way between the notches and the end of the board. This is made from 8 mm square dowelling and is bevelled as shown. The completed floor board can now be fitted to the carton by slotting it into the hole in the carton diagonally and

sliding it in until the notches can engage with the border pieces. The board can then be flattened against what is now the floor of the nest carton (C), locked in place by the notches.

As an added precaution the bevelled end of the board is fixed to the floor of the carton by means of a drawing pin inserted from the outside. The floor board can be removed by removing the pin, tilting to disengage the notches and sliding it out [3].

In our experience, the cartons are robust and stay dry throughout the season if installed securely in a sheltered position, with the carton tilted down towards the open end. We find that the spout serves as a ready-made peephole for checking the contents with minimum disturbance, giving a clear view through the body of the carton. We also find that the brightly coloured lids aid location in dense vegetation.

From these early results, the cartons show promise as a cheap and effective exploratory tool for sampling potential dormouse habitats. For people who have been put off using nest tubes by the cost, the cartons offer easy access to this type of surveying which has already widened our insight into the diversity of territory that dormice will inhabit.

[1] Morris, P.A. and Temple, R.K., Quarterly Journal of Forestry, 92, pp. 201-205

[2] Anderson, M. and Dale, N., Kent Mammal Group Newsletter, January 2006

[3] We anticipate that this will only be necessary when cartons are cleaned out at the end of the season.