

The Dormouse



It is probably fair to say that the dormouse rather punches above its weight (no more than 40g, so that's not hard) in the rodent popularity stakes. The sleeping dormouse will forever be known for providing a cushion for the March Hare and Mad Hatter at their tea party. And anyone lucky enough to actually see one 'in the flesh' will find an undeniably cute, tiny creature with golden fur, long fluffy tail and big black eyes. But that is our native hazel dormouse.

This is not to be confused with the edible dormouse, first brought to this country by the Romans who considered them a great delicacy (including as a dessert, dipped in nuts and honey - recipe not available). Latterly, the edible dormouse was accidentally introduced into the wild in Hertfordshire in 1902. It is grey in colour, weighs three times as much and can live nearly twice as long as the hazel (nine years for the edible versus five for the hazel). In the last five years their numbers have increased rapidly to approximately 30,000 individuals, and have been named in a recent report as one of fourteen invasive foreign species of mammal that could do the most harm to our countryside, alongside the likes of grey squirrel, American mink, and muntjac deer. They can damage woodland by stripping bark and destroy fruit crops such as apples and plums.

The name dormouse derives from the French 'dormir' (to sleep), and as fans of Lewis Carroll know, this is something (both species) are keen on. The hazel dormouse can hibernate for up to 7 months a year if the weather is harsh. Prior to hibernation they build up fat reserves by eating nuts (often hazel), seeds and berries. When the weather starts to turn cold around late October, they leave their normal habitat of trees bushes and hedgerows to build a tightly woven tennis ball-sized nest on the ground, such as amongst tree roots. In this they curl up, tail around face, and sleep.

When they finally emerge in May, the hungry dormice head back up into the trees, feeding up on the buds and blossoming flowers of trees such as hawthorn and oak, as well as insects and caterpillars when available. During the summer, it's more nest building, this time in tree holes or among the branches of trees, bushes and hedges, in preparation for breeding. The nest is usually made of leaves and grass and large enough to accommodate one litter of 4-5 blind hairless young, which start to forage with the mother when they are about three weeks old, leaving the nest after about 6-8 weeks.

Like so much else of our beloved nature, the hazel dormouse population is in serious decline, an estimated fall of 52% since 1995, with the south of England being its

most important stronghold. The reasons for this decline are thought to be the usual culprits: habitat loss in the form of ancient woodland and hedges; reduction in traditional forestry methods such as coppicing; climate change disrupting their hibernation patterns.

The Wildlife Group has put up specially designed dormouse survey tubes in suitable sites across the Parish for the last few years, which are renewed and checked each spring and autumn. After a couple of seasons they may be moved to another site. Up to this time the only record we had for dormouse in the area was a jaw found in a barn owl pellet from Stanton's Farm (actually it is extremely rare to find this species in barn owl pellets). In our surveys we have tended to target sites that we thought looked good for dormouse, such as woods or hedgerows with lots of hazel, honeysuckle and bramble. We have found well-established populations in two of these areas. In the last year, Kim Dawson, Community Ranger with Lewes District Council, has kindly helped with her expertise in this task, and has also donated some nest boxes for breeding.

Even when conducting a survey, you are unlikely to be lucky enough to see an actual hazel dormouse. The closest you may get is spotting a hazel nut shell bearing a smooth, circular hole, the sign that one of these beautiful little creatures has come to call, or a nest of grass and leaves with finely shredded honeysuckle bark. But sometimes, also a dormouse.

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