

Plumpton and East Chiltington Wildlife Group

Harvest mouse

The February magazine included an article by James Otway on rodents in general, but I thought it might be worth looking in a bit more detail at the harvest mouse (*Micromys minutus*). With a short nose and small inconspicuous hairy ears, it is perhaps a bit more like a vole than a mouse, but it also has a very long prehensile tail that it can use almost as an extra limb. At an average weight of about 6g (and with the newborn young weighing 0.6-0.8g), it is one of our smallest mammal species. The slightly reddish sandy-coloured fur has perhaps led to its old or local names of 'red mouse' or 'red ranny'.

With its climbing ability, helped by its prehensile tail and the way it is better able to spread its toes than our other mice and voles, it spends much time above ground and so favours areas of tall rough grassland, reed beds, grassy hedgerows and ditches, bramble patches, cereal and sometimes other crops. They are capable of translocating in the autumn to areas that will be less prone to flooding (or cutting) than some of their optimal summer habitat. They feed on a range of buds, flowers, fruits and seeds, and also take a fair range of insect food.

Mating occurs from April, with births from May through to late autumn, but those late births are likely to suffer high mortality from increasingly poor weather. Litter size is 1-8 (with 12 recorded), with the young independent at two to three weeks.

The most obvious feature is their summer (breeding) nest, which is a ball of grass woven between several stems of grass or reed. The breeding nests are c.10cm diameter, with no obvious entrance hole; smaller nests with a more obvious entrance hole are usually constructed by individual males and juveniles. When first constructed of fresh material the nest is green and difficult to pick out from the surrounding vegetation; in the autumn when the nest is brown and surrounding vegetation has died down, these nest are much easier to spot. These aerial nests are often used for breeding but the adults may have several nests to choose from.

In the winter they spend most of the time at ground level and many years ago I was staying with the warden of Studland Heath National Nature Reserve. On being asked what I wanted to do for the week, I rather naively said 'Oh, just give me a week in the life of a nature reserve warden'. So we spent much of the week mending fences, clearing ditches, collecting rubbish, cutting encroaching vegetation, but we did also manage to get a bit of natural history in as well; one wish I had was to find some harvest mouse nests and so we spend a few hours searching the tops of marshland tussocks of purple moor grass (*Molinia*) and found quite a lot of the winter nests of harvest mouse amongst the base of the grass stems.

The harvest mouse may be quite widespread here, but there is some evidence of a general decline from changing land management practices – in fact, a decline of up to 70% has been reported for one national assessment. It is a difficult animal to survey for and, as far as I can tell, the only Plumpton and East Chiltington records are of the remains of three that I found amongst 82 mammal remains in a sample of barn owl pellets from near East Chiltington Church in 2006. The Sussex Mammal Group is currently running a harvest mouse survey and we could survey some parts of our territory as part of that project, and maybe with a bit of start-up help from one of the survey organisers. The usual survey technique is nest-searching in the autumn, but there may also be the opportunity for a bit of live-trapping with a better chance to see the animals themselves.

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