



# The hazel dormouse

Last year, our ambitious survey for dormice was successful in turning up the first official record for the Parish. As dormice become active again this month it's a good time to look at their ecology.

Out of the two species of dormouse that now occur in Britain, the hazel dormouse (*muscardinus avellanarius*) is the native species. Although a familiar little mammal, it is infrequently seen, due to its rarity and nocturnal habits. Over the last century the hazel dormouse has declined both in numbers and distribution. Evidence suggests that it has become extinct in about half its former range. The total adult population is now thought to number about 45,000. The current strongholds are the counties of Kent and Dorset, although this is probably due to greater recording efforts.

Dormice can live for 5–6 years – much longer than other rodents. They cannot digest complex plant material, due to the lack of a caecum, and therefore have a wide and varied diet that is big on seasonality. In the spring their diet is based on flowers, pollen, nectar and buds; in the autumn it's nuts and berries. However they face a potential food shortage in the summer, when insects become an important component. It takes them 20–30 minutes to open a hazel nut but two a night is all they need.

They live at low population densities even in favourable, well-managed habitats. For woodland sites, four to 10 adults per hectare is optimal; in hedgerows it's three to four.

Breeding occurs between May and September. Although they may weave their own nests in bushes and shrubs, dormice prefer to use the hollows in branches, trunks or old squirrel dreys. In Sussex they can have two litters of (typically) four to five young. The young are weaned in two months. Recent genetic research has revealed that females crèche their young together. As with hedgehogs, the second brood has to race to reach hibernation weight (12–15g) by the winter.

It is for their winter survival strategy that dormice are most widely known. Hibernation begins when the nights become cool in the autumn and available

food decreases, usually around the first frosts. Larger dormice appear to hibernate earlier; smaller animals continue to fatten up into December in mild winters. When ready, they descend to the ground and build a small, tightly woven nest. They hibernate under logs, moss and leaves or among dead leaves at the base of coppice stools and dense hedges. They need a cool, moist place so their metabolic rate stays low and they don't desiccate through water vapour lost during breathing.

This year we will continue to survey the parish and, working with landowners, try to improve woodland and hedgerow habitats through appropriate management. Please report any sightings of dormice to the group and we will happily advise on habitat management.

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