



National Dormouse Monitoring Scheme

NEWS SHEET SPRING 1993

Ten years ago, few people would have believed it was possible to set up a nationwide network to monitor the fortunes of one of our most elusive mammals - the dormouse. This has now been done. There are currently 35 National Dormouse Monitoring sites, with over 2600 nestboxes in total. Despite some new sites not being checked until October, over 1000 records of dormice were collected in 1992. This is a short report on last year's monitoring to keep everyone up to date on progress. There are now too many sites for reports from each one to be given in this digest. A few sites are mentioned as examples of general findings, to which all have made an important contribution.

Sites new in 1992

In 1992 16 new sites were added to the dormouse monitoring network. These, and others, have been declared Key Sites, at which the long term conservation of dormice is the management priority. It is hoped to extend the Key Sites network this year, as part of English Nature's Species Recovery Programme, working with The Vincent Wildlife Trust.

Dormice have already been recorded using nestboxes at 80% of the new sites (Fig. 1). Of the five sites where dormice have yet to be found in nestboxes, four were not established until July or August. Three of these sites are also on the edge of the dormouse's range, in Cornwall and Shropshire, where finding any known dormouse sites was difficult. Dormice have been recorded near all the sites concerned, so use of nestboxes is expected in due course. However, on the basis of past experience, nestbox occupation will probably be erratic at some sites where dormice occur at particularly low population density.

Nestboxes appeared to be found and used by dormice very rapidly. For example, a dormouse was discovered after only 22 days at Old Traveller's Rest in Cumbria and several dormouse nests were found in boxes at Andrew's Wood (Devon) after only two weeks. This suggests that nestboxes represent a very important resource for dormice and really are important aides in their conservation.

Results from established NDM sites

Last summer was the seventh that nestboxes have been monitored at our original study site near Cheddar. Very few dormice were present in

nestboxes last summer and only a handful of litters were found (Fig. 1). This is in marked contrast to previous years, when there have been over 20 litters found, and emphasises that long term monitoring is essential to obtain a clear picture of how dormouse numbers change from year to year.

At Pwllwyrach near Brecon, the first litters of dormice seem not to have been born until mid-August (birth dates can be back-calculated from the body weights of young). There were also no early births (June) at Siccaridge Wood (Gloucestershire), or Lea and Pagets (Herefordshire). By contrast, young each weighing 2.5g, i.e. born at the end of June, were found on 9th July at Spong Wood in Kent. There was then a peak of births at this site from mid-July to mid-August. Similarly at Bramley Frith, (Hampshire) the first births were in late June. It thus seems that dormouse births were about two weeks earlier in south eastern counties compared to the south west of Britain, contrary to what might be expected. A difference of two weeks may not sound much, but is probably sufficient to have a significant effect on survival of young. It might also mean the difference between a female producing one or two litters in a summer.

At sites in Cumbria, litters were not produced until mid August, fully six weeks after those in Kent. These late births must have a strong influence on Cumbrian dormouse populations. This is reflected in the very low ratio of juveniles to adults, for example at Ulpha (Fig. 1). Dormice at the Cumbrian sites also appear to be living at particularly low density, probably around 3-4 per hectare, leaving them particularly vulnerable to local extinction.

In September we discovered a single dormouse at a site in Northumberland, the only dormouse to turn up in 100 nestboxes after nearly three full summers! Dormouse gnawed hazel nuts were found at this site during the Mammal Society survey in 1979, but the animals had never actually been seen there. Excepting the two confirmed sites in Cumbria, this is the only wood in which dormice are known to occur in the whole of northern England.

Dormice also occur, for the present, in a tiny two hectare wood near Ross-on-Wye. Seven animals (three adults & four young, 42 nestboxes up) were found there in September. This is probably at least half of the wood's total dormouse population. Monitoring is being conducted to see just how long such a small population can survive and whether animals are immigrating from a neighbouring woodland.

In conclusion, a large amount of information was collected last year, from which very important findings for dormouse conservation are already emerging. All the data have now been input to a database and some analyses will be done over the summer. A second News Sheet will be sent out in the autumn. In the meantime, please do keep monitoring your nestboxes - the results will be very valuable indeed.

Fig. 1. Numbers of dormice per 50 nestboxes at 35 National Dormouse Monitoring sites in October 1992. Numbers of adult and juvenile ($\leq 16.0g$) dormice are shown. No data are available for a few sites (nd) and at others only dormouse nests (n) not the animals themselves were found.

