



News sheet Spring 1994

National Dormouse Monitoring Scheme

Following the success of the Dormouse Key Sites concept, we are seeking to extend the system to include more sites and more nestboxes to be monitored each year. In 1993 four new sites were added to the scheme and we hope that still more will be added in 1994. This will enable us to keep our finger on the national dormouse pulse and also help local volunteers to see how their data fits in with the national picture. There are now over 6,500 records in the database, thanks to the dormouse team, nearly 2,500 of them from last year alone. If we can keep the scheme going for a few more years, it should be possible to properly analyse differences in breeding season and success in different parts of the country. It will also allow local sites to be monitored in such a way that woodland managers should be able to see what effect management (or lack of it) is having on their dormice.

During 1993, dormice were 'rediscovered' at Staward Gorge, their most northerly site in Britain (Northumberland). In September a litter of 3 young were found, also another 4 animals including one in an area where dormice had not been seen for 4 years! The National Trust are about to commence management of the site to help safeguard this precarious population.

Three of the new sites set up in 1992 had dormice in the nestboxes in 1993 and dormice have now turned up in boxes at Earl's Hill and Brook Coppice (Shropshire) and Lantyan Wood (Cornwall), all close to the edge of their national range. Only one site (Fir Tree Copse in Surrey) has so far failed to have dormice in its nestboxes, despite being dominated by hazel and next to a large forest area. Down at Lantyan, Ron Evenden had been ploughing through chest high bramble for months before finding dormice, showing that patience and perseverance are needed, especially if dormice are thin on the ground. This saves a bit of embarrassment too because the boxes were put up there on the basis of finding only a single dormouse-gnawed nut!

In 1992, two of the Kentish sites (Spong Wood and Yockletts Bank) had the highest rate of occupation in October of any of the sites monitored (26 and 24 dormice per 50 boxes respectively). In 1993 Spong was again among the high scorers, but Yockletts was one of the worst! This shows why it is unwise to draw conclusions too soon, and why long term monitoring is necessary.

1993 was the eighth year of monitoring at Cheddar, when more dormice were found than in 1992 and more births, perhaps 2-3 weeks earlier than normal. Very early young, 1st June, were found at Bridesford (Isle of Wight) and at Lea & Pagets (a long-established site in Herefordshire) and Bramley Frith (Hampshire) there were also early births. All these sites are oak-dominated and the

timing of breeding may have something to do with early flowering of oak or extra large numbers of caterpillars on these trees in 1993. It is too soon to do more than speculate on what this all means, we need more annual data. There were also signs in 1993 that births may be bimodal at some sites, with peaks in early and late summer and few between (in July). This could reflect second litters being produced in late summers or it could be that the late ones are from females born the previous year and breeding for the first time, rather late because they have not been sufficiently mature earlier. Who knows, but it does show the sort of things that long term monitoring should cast light on.

Most of the data submitted in 1993 came from a small number of sites which were monitored every month, not just in June and October, and this is certainly very helpful, but does mean more work! These sites also often had a lot of animals. The number of dormice per 50 boxes in October is shown in the accompanying chart. A few sites are blank either because no data were obtained last year or because the information was sent in too late to be included in the analysis. Nevertheless, in the latter case, the information has been entered retrospectively to the database and will still be a part of the long term scene. However, it does help a lot if data sheets can be returned by Christmas please.

At two sites in Hampshire, considerable numbers of yellow necked mice were found in the boxes. We tend to think of these as an impurity and throw them out, but yellow necks are themselves a rare and poorly understood species. It would be helpful to hear from anyone else who gets this species, partly to add to distribution maps, but also to gather information about the interactions between this species and dormice. It is believed that yellow necks are quite arboreal in their habits (and have been reported gnawing weather recording gear 30 feet up in trees!). Maybe there is another interesting species to be studied here? Hopefully we will be able to organise some simultaneous radio tracking to investigate possible competition between the two species for food as well as nestboxes.

Another observation in 1993 concerns parasites. Dormice are normally remarkably free of them, but at Spong in Kent we found quite a few dormice with tiny nematodes ('pin worms' about 3mm long) in their eyes. These cause a gummy mess and the eyelids then become stuck together, effectively blinding the dormice. This would not help their success in climbing through the trees in the dark. In fact it also corresponded with a period of sharp frost which left no food on the trees anyway, so the animals were in a fix. Many must have been forced into hibernation in a poor state and we wait to see how many are present this year. These particular nematodes have previously been reported from harvest mice and apparently normally live in soil and damp leaf litter. This might make it advisable to clean out all rotting nest material from nestboxes, in case it helps sustain these nasty beasts. Normally we suggest leaving dormice nests in the boxes and throwing out bird nests (because these often contain hair and could support infestations of mites). Now it looks as though we should extend that advice to include soggy dormouse or wood mouse nests as well and to ensure that drain holes in the boxes keep the interior from getting too wet. If anyone else sees signs of transparent wiggly things in dormouse eyes, please take swabs and let us know.

Other news from 1993 includes our first full scale experimental reintroduction, to Cambridgeshire, where dormice have not been reported this century. A good site was found and dormice were released from special cages to which they could return if they did not find sufficient food. This they continued to do, for weeks sometimes, evidently finding Rich Tea biscuits at least as appealing as what the wood offered. However, by August, the hazel nuts were ready and the

dormice were all weaned on to a more appropriate diet. By releasing the animals early in the season (May) and helping them overcome natural early-summer food shortage, they were given time to breed before being overtaken by winter. Several litters were born and by October there were more animals present in the wood than we had released, despite a few losses. Unfortunately, soon after hibernation began, they were treated to some of the wettest weeks in recent memory. The wood has a tendency to flood (despite being on a hill), due to its clay soil, so this may have been a disaster to dormice hibernation on the ground. We will be checking the boxes soon (and anxiously!) to count the survivors.

Finally, nobody could have not noticed that 1993 included National Dormouse Week. The point of this was to get people interested in dormice and the important conservation issues they highlight. It was also hoped that we could get lots of ordinary people to take a practical interest and go looking for dormouse-gnawed hazel nuts. An observant H G Hurrell noticed, years ago, that dormice open hazels in a special way and leave these characteristic signs about, offering the prospect of detecting the presence of dormice without ever seeing the actual animals. So, last year, English Nature sent out more than 10,000 instruction packs to volunteers who then set off to look for hazel nuts wearing a special 'I'm a Nutter' badge. The great British public rose to the challenge brilliantly and inspected more than 130,000 nuts! They were supposed to send in suspected dormouse nuts to 'the Experts' for authentication and it all got a bit out of hand. Over 6,000 have arrived so far and boxes of them are still piling up in English Nature's Peterborough Office. The Welsh have done well too and discovered several new dormouse sites. We now have an up to date dormouse distribution map. This confirms the presence of dormice in most of those counties where they were reported by the Mammal Society survey nearly 20 years ago. Also and, perhaps as important, the Great Nut Hunt of '93 failed to reveal them in any county from which they were then believed to be absent. Thus it seems confirmed that dormice have become extinct over about half their former range and have not been detected in 7 counties where they were present towards the end of the last century. They are probably still disappearing and the 3000+ nestboxes that are now in place will help secure the future of the dormice at least in some places.

Pat Morris & Paul Bright, April 1994

