

NATIONAL DORMOUSE MONITORING SCHEME

Newsletter for 1996 (April 1997)



Here is a report on the dormouse nestbox monitoring done in 1996. More than 3,100 nestboxes were inspected, at least once each and 2,470 dormice examined (over 600 in October alone), at more than 40 sites. This monitoring scheme continues to break new ground and is still almost the only scheme for monitoring any British mammal. It is still expanding too, so the chart comparing sites has been printed sideways. We will soon have to think up another way of displaying the results!

One way would be to show how numbers have changed over the years, after all that is what long term monitoring is supposed to be all about. This is now becoming possible as several sites have been monitored for long enough to make such an analysis worthwhile. So, this year we have tried it and a second page of charts shows the result for 12 of the longest-monitored sites. This is a new approach and there are many flaws, so the results should not be taken too seriously until we have given the matter further thought. One of the key problems is that dormice are so sensitive to weather conditions that it can make a lot of difference whether the key visit in October is made just before or just after a cold snap. This may seriously affect comparisons year to year and site to site. We will try to devise an index that is based on all the visits made each summer so as to minimise this problem, but not all sites are monitored monthly, so we may have to move to a two tiered monitoring scheme, treating those monitored twice a year differently from those inspected monthly. We'll see.

Meanwhile, the comparison of sites in October 1996 shows two new 'Champions' - Croes Robert Wood (no. 15) and Bottom Wood (6). Yockletts bank (41 - a previous top scoring site) was rather reduced again. Spong (31) and Black Rock (4) continue to do well. The sites furthest north, Roudsea (29), Old Travellers Rest (24) and Ulpha (35) all had few dormice again, but it is good that the animals survive there at all. Data for the most northerly site, Staward Gorge, arrived too late to be included in this analysis, as did the forms for some others, sorry!

The longer term monitoring charts are drawn so that each site uses its first year's data as "100%". Then each subsequent year is plotted in a comparative way so that you can see whether there were progressively more or fewer animals with the passage of time at that particular place. On this basis it appears that Spong is gradually declining, perhaps as the coppice there gets over mature and Siccaridge is on the up. However, the yearly fluctuations (and the problems referred to above) are such that these changes are probably not statistically significant and should be viewed cautiously. This is highlighted by Elaine Hurrell's observation (at Andrews Wood in Devon, not on the chart) that there were 21 dormice present in October 1995, but only 4 in 1996. We will need longer data sets to provide more reliable analyses, but you can at least see what we are trying to do and how your efforts fit into the overall picture.

As for your own observations on 1996, several people commented that it was a generally 'poor year'. April was warm, but May 1996 was the coldest for 50 years, with many ground frosts followed by unusually heavy rain. Not good for dormice at all! Adrian Coward, monitoring Cheddar Wood (Somerset) reported a slow start with little activity until August/ September; a similar situation was found by Frank Kirkby in Cumbria. In Surrey, Chris Thain found no animals present in April, May or November. However, the early fine weather brought 9 dormice to Gordon Vaughan's bird nestboxes in Okehampton (Devon), with babies born in June despite the

lousy weather. Conversely, Andy Jackson at Wakehurst Place (Sussex) reports that no dormice were found at all and early nesting stopped before it really got going. A similar tale of woe came from Cliff Tack (Bedfordshire) who checked 200 boxes, but only saw one dormouse in the whole year. Harry Paget Wilkes in Somerset recorded a disappointing year too. In the Pengelli forest, the dormice had 'the worst year yet', with no young recorded, but at Monk Wood (Worcestershire) a 'good number of sightings' was made. Now that we are getting good data sets from many sites each year, it will be worthwhile trying to estimate dates for first births and making further comparisons between sites and between years- another data analysis project! Meanwhile at some sites the animals have been tattooed. Dormice at Briddlesford (Isle of Wight) have been surprisingly mobile and moved between copses, presumably using the hedgerows which link them. At Spong, Shirley Thompson found 5 animals that had been tattooed in 1993. At least one was an adult when first caught (with a family of nestlings), so by 1996 it must have been at least 4 years old.

Again several people reported wood mice and yellow necked mice as 'impurities' in their catch. Yellow necks are especially interesting and may be as rare as dormice, nobody knows. One dormouse was reported sharing a nest with some rather worried pied flycatchers. Another was camped out in a tit's nest with old eggs. Dormice do eat eggs, but the tits produce loads of them and anyway aren't meant to be occupying dormouse nestboxes.

With this newsletter, by way of thanking everyone for their help in nestbox monitoring, we are enclosing a copy of our paper about why dormice are rare. This should give food for thought and the climatic vagaries referred to in this Newsletter can be seen in a wider context. Hopefully, over the years, the monitoring scheme should allow a better understanding of the processes by which dormice disappear, including the effect of climate and weather. This is already evident in the smaller litters and lower population density of dormice in the nestboxes at northern sites for example. Don't forget that English Nature's 'Dormouse Conservation Handbook' puts together many useful ideas that we have gained over the years. If you want further copies, they cost £4.50 from EN.

Finally, here are the recording sheets for 1997. Please do your best to follow the instructions carefully. Above all, do please send in the completed forms by the beginning of December (write it in your diary **NOW!!**). Otherwise the data analysis is delayed, resulting in either a double mailing the following spring (costly) or omission of sites where data arrived after a December cut off date (a pity). So, please try to send in completed forms as early as possible.

Once again, many thanks for all your help and best wishes for a successful dormouse year.

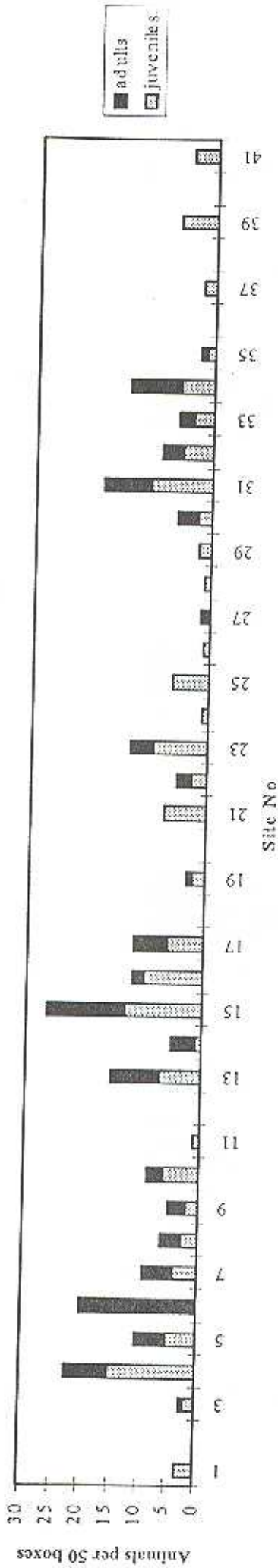


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National Dormouse Monitoring Scheme- results for October 1996

No.	Site	No.	Site	No.	Site	No.	Site
1	Andrews Wood	12	Coed-y-Cerrig	23	Monk Wood	34	The Warren
2	Beacon Hill	13	Coughton Marsh	24	Old Travellers Rest	35	Ulpha
3	Beer Quarry Caves	14	Crab Wood	25	Old Winchester Hill	36	Vann Lake
4	Black Rock	15	Croes Robert Wood	26	Pantperthog	37	Vauce Wood
5	Blackmoor Copse	16	Kings Wood	27	Pengelli Forest	38	Wakehurst Place
6	Bottom Wood	17	Lantyan Wood	28	Pwillywrach	39	Wallis Wood
7	Bramley Frith	18	Lea & Pagets	29	Roudsea Wood	40	West Sedgemoor
8	Briddlesford	19	Leeping Stocks	30	Siccaridge Wood	41	Yocklets Bank
9	Burham Down	20	Levin Down	31	Spong Wood		
10	Cheddar Wood East	21	Mallydams Wood	32	Spuckles Wood		
11	Cheddar Wood West	22	Midger Wood	33	The Perch		



NB Sites for which no October data was collected are not shown.
 Dormice weighing more than 16 grams were assumed to be adult, unless otherwise stated in survey notes.
 Escapee dormice were all counted as adults.

