



Dear All

Here are the recording forms and guidelines for your 1999 dormouse box checks. Please return your completed forms as soon as possible after the last check and in any case, by the end of November 1999.

Thank you all for sending your records for 1998 so promptly at the end of last year. You will be glad to know that this has enabled us to get well ahead with entering the data into the database. All records have now been entered and analysis is about to begin. This is an interim report; a more detailed newsletter will be circulated in the autumn as your results for 1999 are received.

It may help you to visualise what happens to your records if we outline the structure of the database. It consists of a collection of tables to which two new ones are added each year - in one of these, each line gives details of an individual dormouse, even if it was dead or escaped. Where more than one dormouse is found in a box, the number in the group is entered in one of the columns but each dormouse still has a separate line, even each pink baby. If the babies have not been counted only one is entered, since this must be the minimum, and a note is made that there were others. For 1998 this table (dorbox98) now contains 2216 records each representing one dormouse recorded.

The other annual table (dorvisits98) has a line for each visit, recording the date, who was the recorder, how many boxes were checked, the number of dormice recorded and the number of other boxes containing dormouse nests. In this way we can note occasions when checks were made but no dormice were found. Negative results are equally important to a monitoring programme so please do always give dates of your visits and number of boxes checked even if you find no dormice. A total of 383 visits are so far recorded for 1998.

Please do complete the forms as fully as you can for each visit you make and for each dormouse you find, even where it is repetitive. We cannot assume, for example, that the animal is active or non-breeding unless you enter the appropriate code.

There are two other tables on the database, one listing the recorders names, and addresses etc as well as the sites they check, and one listing details of each site. These tables accumulate information as new recorders join the scheme and new sites are monitored. The list of sites is now up to 83. There are a few which have not yet been included in the scheme because the data provided is not in a suitable form but we hope that all recorders will in time use our guidelines and record all the details needed to monitor their dormouse populations properly.

Many recorders regarded 1998 as a dismal year for dormice. These ranged from our most northerly outpost at Staward Gorge in Northumberland where it was the "first year since monitoring began that young dormice have not been found" to Hampshire where Barry Proctor said it was a "terrible year" and David Ball at Ashford Hangers said that "dormice numbers are

Provisional - October 1998

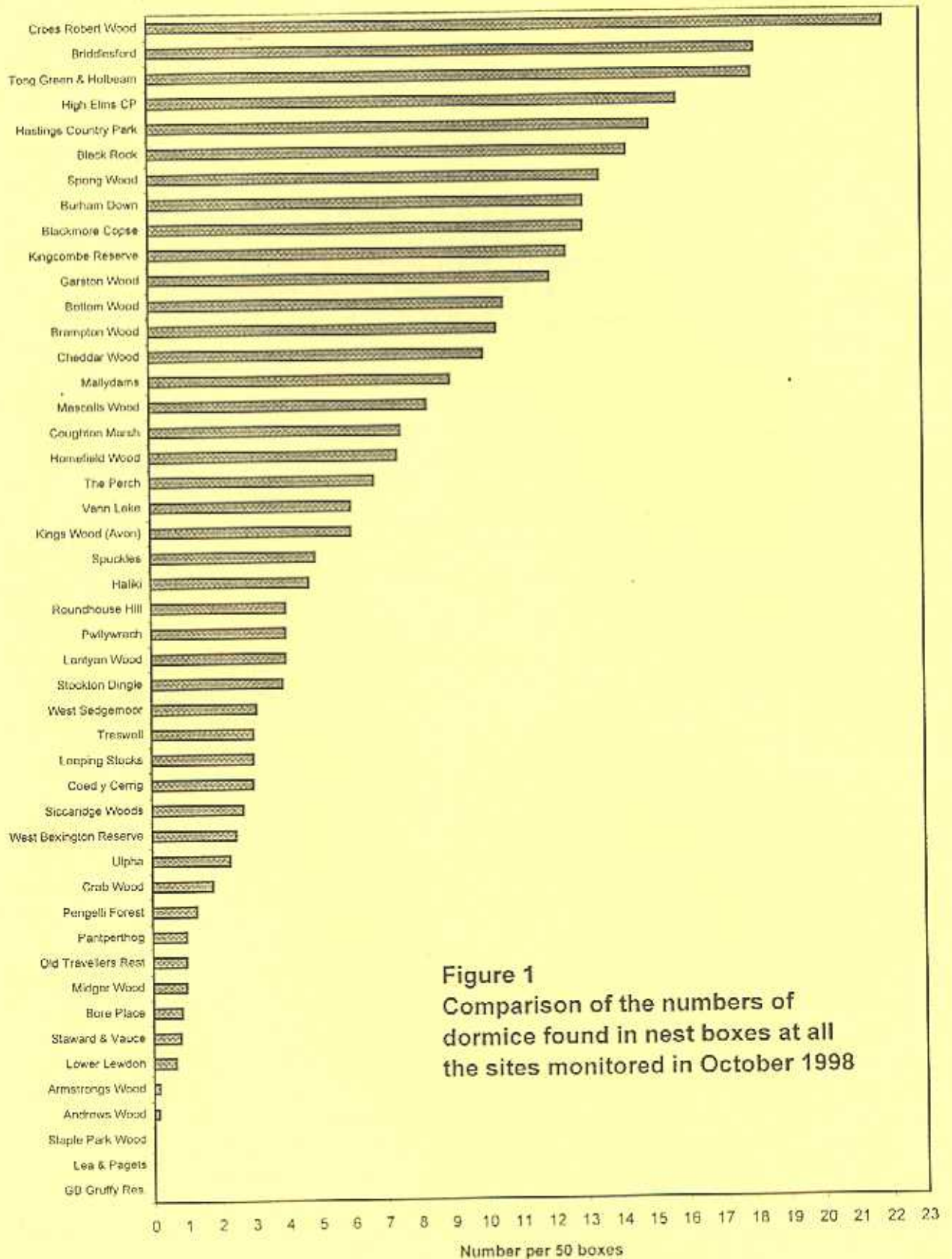


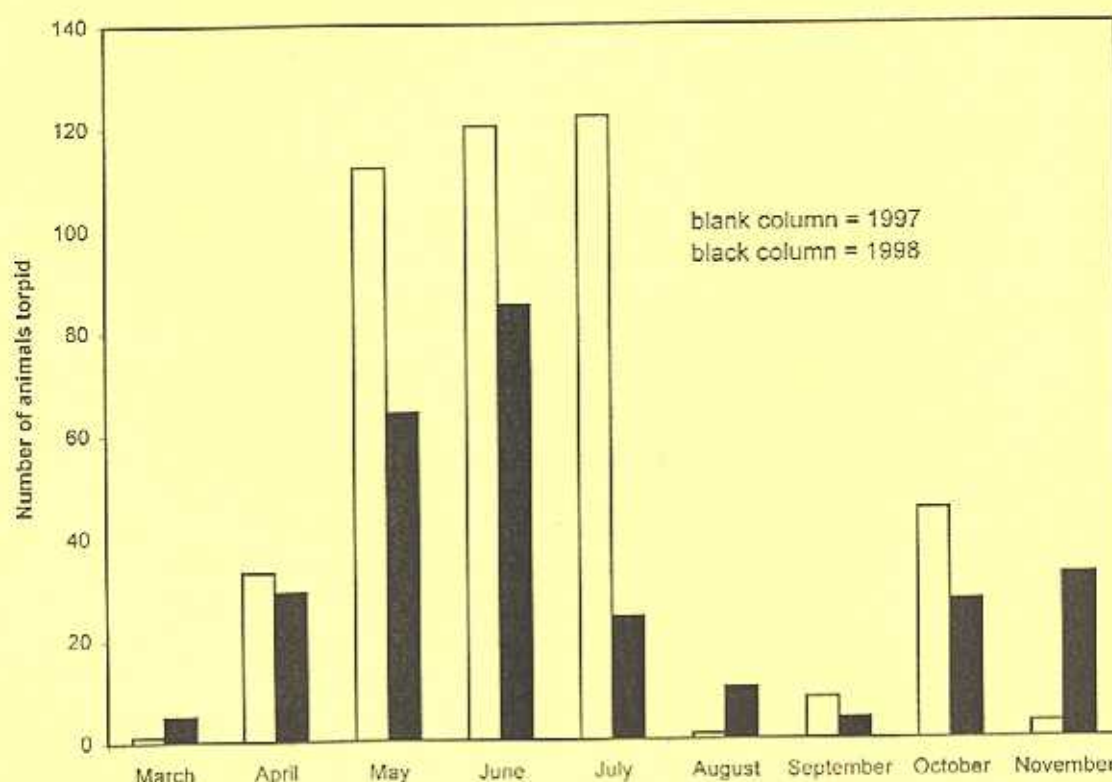
Figure 1
 Comparison of the numbers of
 dormice found in nest boxes at all
 the sites monitored in October 1998

very down on past years". In contrast, at West Sedgemoor in Somerset Harry Paget-Wilkes said it was their best year so far and at Hastings Country Park in Sussex, where boxes were put up for the first time in 1997, there were dormice all over the place and several good litters. Several other sites also had what seem like very good populations of dormice.

If we assume that dormouse numbers are at their maximum in October, and express the number recorded per 50 boxes (to provide a comparative index) we can see from Figure 1 how variable were the populations of dormice at the different sites. Although not directly comparable with the similar chart produced for October 1997 (Figure 2 in the Dormouse Monitor 1998) because animals weighing less than 7g have not been excluded here, we can see that the range of numbers per 50 boxes is very similar. It will be a long time, and only with the help of continued recording all over the country, before we are able to unravel which conditions are best and worst for dormice. Even then, it will be very difficult to disentangle the effects of weather from those of habitat. Your continued help is therefore essential and much appreciated.

On the subject of weather - it seemed while entering the data that many recorders found torpid dormice in their boxes rather later in the summer than usual. It is not unexpected to find animals torpid in April, May or June and again in October or November perhaps, but in July and August is odd. However, as you will see from Figure 2, there were in fact more records of torpid dormice in 1997 (345) than in 1998 (280) and the pattern of their distribution through the year was very similar. There *were* more records in August 1998 than in the same month in 1997 but not very many in either. This shows how important it is to look at the data overall and not just to trust first impressions.

Figure 2
The incidence of torpor at all sites in 1997 & 1998



The database includes sites to which dormice have been reintroduced over the last few years and in these woods the animals are individually marked. This allows us to say, for example, who is sleeping with who, how long they live and where they go. At the release site in Cheshire we know that a male and female who were sharing a box in October 1997 were still together in May 1998. This confirms earlier, similar indications that dormice have more complex social relationships than is general in other small mammals. Similarly, at Ulpha in Cumbria, John Webster was able to note that a marked female recorded in May 1998, would be 5 years old in August. This too is useful confirmation that dormice can live much longer than most other small mammals. This ties in with their relatively low annual production of young and long period of parental care. The latter was well illustrated by an example from Spong Wood in Kent where Shirley Thompson found a female of 21g and 7 large youngsters (5M and 2F) weighing 11-13g all still together in one box in October. Very cosy!

Thank you to all those who sent copies of their local newsletters. These are always read with interest and kept in the files. A number of recorders also sent supplementary analyses of their own records (eg individual box use and/or dormouse movements). These too are interesting and filed with the records, and will be useful for reference in due course.

Best wishes to you all and we look forward to hearing from you later in the year
Yours sincerely



Pat Morris & Paul Bright

P.S. A DATE FOR YOUR DIARY
We are just starting to arrange
an informal gathering of dormouse monitors
25-26 March 2000
probably in Cheddar, Somerset.
Make a note of the date,
More details in the autumn newsletter.