Dormouse: European protected species

There are two species of dormouse in Britain, the common or hazel dormouse *Muscardinus avellanarius* and the introduced edible dormouse *Glis glis*. This note is concerned with the former species, which has browny-orange fur, black eyes, a bushy tail, a round body and short round ears.

Biology and distribution

Location

The common dormouse is one of our most recognisable small rodents because of its golden fur, furry tail and large black eyes. It is about the same size as other mice (weight 17-20g, but up to 30-40g just before hibernation), but has a rather different lifestyle. The dormouse now has a restricted distribution in Britain, with few sites north of the Midlands (except where it has been reintroduced). See figure 1 below.

Habitat

The dormouse is a nocturnal animal that lives mainly, though not exclusively, in deciduous woodland and scrub, where it feeds among the branches of trees and shrubs. Except for hibernation, it rarely descends to the ground and is reluctant to cross open spaces, perhaps because of the danger of predation.

It feeds on a wide variety of arboreal foods, including flowers (nectar and pollen), fruits (berries and nuts) and some insects (especially aphids and caterpillars). It will also eat buds and young leaves, but not mature leaves. A high degree of diversity among tree and shrub species is desirable in order to ensure that an unbroken sequence of foods is available throughout the summer. Certain tree species are particularly valuable as providers of food at different times of year. Hazel appears to be an important provider of insects, and its nuts form the main food used to fatten up for hibernation. Where hazel is scarce or absent smaller fruit seeds, such as those from hornbeam or blackthorn sloes may suffice, but offer less food in exchange for the gnawing needed to open them.

Photograph by Dave Bevan

Although woodland is the most important habitat for dormice, they will also live in hedgerows, preferring species-rich hedgerows that are interconnected or connected to woodland. The best hedgerows for dormice are wide and tall with abundant mast and fruit-bearing trees and shrubs.

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Lifecycle

In autumn, usually early October, dormice hibernate in nests built just beneath the surface of the ground, often under moss or leaf litter. They remain in these nests until spring (late April or early May), surviving on fat laid down the previous autumn. During summer, dormice build nests in tree cavities or in shrubs. Nests are usually woven from shredded honeysuckle bark or, if this is not available, grasses or leaves.

Legislation

The dormouse is strictly protected under the Wildlife & Countryside Act 1981 (as amended) and the Conservation (Natural Habitats &c.) Regulations 1994 (as amended). The deliberate capturing, disturbing, injuring and killing of dormice is prohibited, as is damaging or destroying their breeding sites and resting places (note that this is a simplified summary of the legislation; see other texts for details).

Issues

Dormice and farming

Common farming operations can have both positive and negative effects on dormice. Woodland and hedgerow management can sustain suitable habitat. Conversely, many farming activities could kill individual dormice or damage resting places. However, so long as there is no large scale loss of high quality habitat, small scale losses of dormice or their resting places is unlikely to compromise populations.

If an activity is likely to result in an offence (such as disturbing dormice), there are several options to proceed lawfully:

- Avoid carrying it out.
- Follow good practice guidance on methods or timing to reduce the chance of committing an offence.
- Obtain a licence to allow otherwise unlawful activities.

A licence application would need to demonstrate that (1) the authorised activities are for a specified purpose (most commonly over-riding public interest or conservation), (2) there is no satisfactory alternative, and (3) the activities would not compromise the conservation status of the species. Some activities would require habitat creation to offset damage or destruction, in order to meet the third test. Licensing is generally more appropriate to land-use change or development than routine farming operations.

Dormice and agri-environment schemes

For agri-environment agreements (eg Environmental Stewardship), ensuring the optimal timing and scale of work will generally be the best approach, (as avoidance may not be compatible with the aims of the agreement).

As a general guide, hedge and woodland work is best carried out during November to February when dormice are likely to be hibernating below ground. This will be particularly important for options such as:

- Maintenance of hedgerows of very high environmental value (HB12)
- Maintenance and restoration of woodland (HC7, HC8)
- Maintenance and restoration of successional areas and scrub (HC15, HC16)

Where the scrub is close to ancient woodland it may be being used by dormice, in which case scrub management to restore grassland (capital items SA, SB, SC and SS) will also need to be timed accordingly.

Entry Level Stewardship and Higher Level Stewardship can support dormouse conservation by maintaining suitable habitats or providing new ones. Prescriptions involving tree or hedge planting can use species listed below (provided this is consistent with other local considerations).

Hazel (the principal source of food for fattening up prior to hibernation), honeysuckle (the finely shredded bark is the preferred nesting material), oak, bramble, sycamore, ash, wayfaring tree, yew, hornbeam, broom, sallow, birch, sweet chestnut, blackthorn, hawthorn.

To produce the most suitable hedges for dormice, management should aim to produce thick bushy hedges that are 3 to 4 metres high. These are likely to only need cutting every third year or less and ideally one third of hedgerows should be left 7 to 10 years between cutting as

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many shrubs do not fruit freely for several years after cutting.

In woodland that is deficient in natural tree holes, nest boxes can provide a suitable alternative. These could be erected at a density of 10-30 per hectare, though a higher density (36 per hectare) is recommended for dormouse population monitoring.

Further information

If you have Internet access please read: European protected species: frequently asked questions **www.naturalengland.org.uk/conservation/wildlife-management-licensing/habsregs.htm** .

Contact us

For questions regarding Wildlife Licensing please telephone 0845 6014523 (local rate) or email**: wildlife@naturalengland.org.uk**

If you have any concerns about your agri-environment agreement and its impact on dormice please contact your local Natural England adviser.

If you do not know your local adviser or for any other enquiries please contact the Natural England Helpline on 0845 600 3078 or email **enquiries@naturalengland.org.uk**.

Natural England Technical Information Notes are available to download from the Natural England website: **www.naturalengland.org.uk**.

References

Bright, P, Morris, P. & Mitchell-Jones, T. (2006). *The dormouse conservation handbook*. English Nature, Peterborough, 74pp, ISBN 1 85716 219 6.

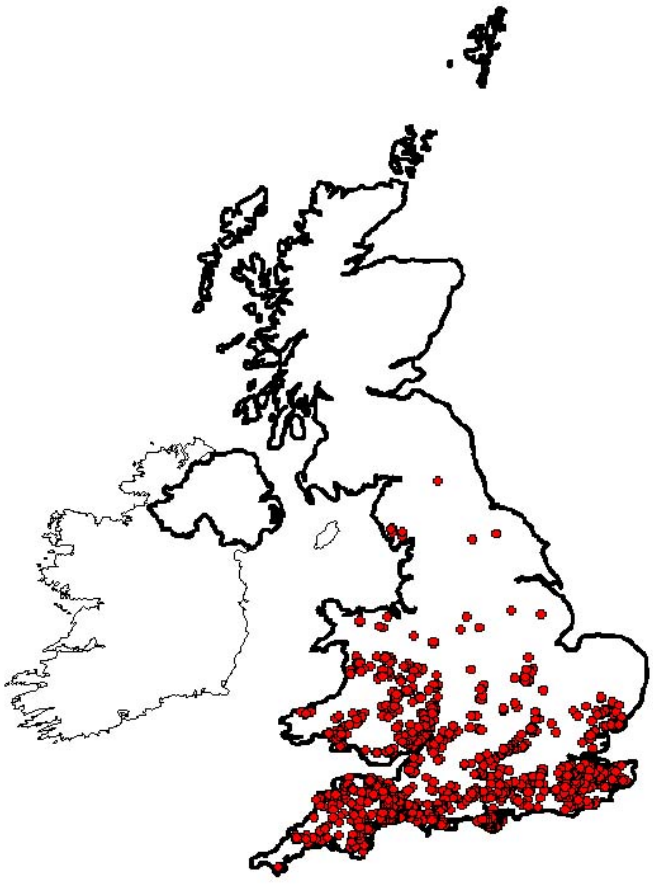

Figure 1