

Gwent Wildlife Trust Wildlife Winners Update for 2009



Tell me more about Dormice....

Once common in our woodlands and hedgerows, the distinctive bushy tailed dormouse is now rarely seen. Dormice, once widespread over most of Britain, are now found mainly in the southern half of the country. In Wales, the dormouse is quite rare in the north but more common in the east and west, with a fairly strong population in the Wye Valley.

The decline in dormouse numbers over the last 100 years has been mainly due to the loss of ancient woodland and a decline in woodland and hedgerow management. Climate change may also be a contributing factor as dormice require warm dry summers and cold winters—conditions we haven't experienced in recent years!



Although dormice are sometimes found in conifer plantations, heathland and reedbeds, they are particularly adapted to living in coppiced woodland. Coppicing (cutting trees down and allowing them to re-grow from the stump) is a traditional form of woodland management that creates ideal dormouse habitat with plenty of sprawling branches, shrubs and brambles providing aerial pathways for dormice to climb through. Mature species-rich hedgerows are also important providing miniature woodland corridors for dormice to move between woodlands.

Unlike other mice dormice have specialised habitat and feeding requirements, spending much of its life in trees and shrubs, rarely coming to the ground except to hibernate. Their nocturnal lifestyle means they spend much of the day asleep in their nest coming out to feed just after sun set. The nest, made from shredded honeysuckle bark surrounded by fresh leaves, can be found in tree holes, in hedgerows and in bramble thickets. As dormice don't forage far from their nest, they need to find a wide variety of foods within a small area. They feed on pollen and nectar, insects, fruit and nuts. In autumn, feeding activity increases as they are busy fattening up for winter hibernation (they can double their body weight in two weeks!). By November most will have built a nest on or near the ground in which to hibernate until the following April.

The Gwent Wildlife Trust has dormice on several of its reserves. At Pentwyn Farm near Penallt and at Croes Robert near Trelleck, we have dormouse boxes which are checked monthly between April and November as part of a national monitoring programme. The programme set up in 1993 by the Peoples Trust for Endangered Species and it now collects data from over 200 sites across England and Wales. The data collected has helped enormously in our understanding of dormouse ecology, habitat requirements and distribution.

If you would like to see one of Britain's most attractive and endearing small mammals and learn a little more about how they live and about the work GWT does to help conserve them then why not come along to the Gwent Wildlife Trusts' 'Introduction to Dormouse' days held regularly throughout the year. Booking is essential—please contact GWT office on 01600 740600.



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Where has my money been spent?

Throughout 2009, we've been monitoring over 200 man-made nestboxes at Croes Robert, Wyeswood Common and Pentwyn Farm. We have trained staff and volunteers to help with this mammoth task. Results are collated by Jan Kinchington and initial results show that dormice are doing fairly well despite another poor summer.

We have been able to run a series of courses and events during 2009. Some are aimed at the general interest level and are designed to teach the public all about dormice. The more that the public are aware of these marvellous creatures, the better it can be for them. Garden and woodland management can help to preserve and improve their natural habitat.

For those with a more specific interest, we can offer more intensive and long term training to learn how to monitor and handle dormice (to do this unsupervised requires a handling licence—not easy to come by). Those folk who successfully obtain their licenses are an invaluable resource, enabling organisations to learn more about these elusive animals, helping to identify their whereabouts and establish numbers in these uncertain times.

We manage some of our woodland sites, namely Croes Robert and Pentwyn Farm, to improve habitat for dormice by coppicing and thinning. This improves the dormice habitat, giving them the corridors they need to survive, as well as providing shelter and food.



A view of GWT's Croes Robert Reserve

Is there anything practical I can do?

Yes! You can help improve your local habitat for dormice—if you have a garden that backs onto woodland or even woodland of your own, you can look for signs of dormice (gnawed hazelnut shells in autumn). There are websites out there that can tell you what to look for, such as www.ptes.org. In fact, this autumn, the People's Trust for Endangered Species (PTES), together with Natural England, is asking members of the public to help save endangered hazel dormice (*Muscardinus avellanarius*) by taking part in the third Great Nut Hunt. This nationwide survey will enlist people's help to search their local woodlands for tell-tale signs of gnawed hazel nuts to determine the distribution status of this rare mammal. To encourage would-be 'nutters' to take part in the survey, PTES has hidden 21 specially-commissioned nuts, 20 in silver and a single gold one, across counties in England and Wales to celebrate the 21st anniversary of the National Dormouse Monitoring Programme (NDMP), only one of which has been found so far.



Nutters of all ages and their families who want to participate will need to register in advance and the survey packs will be available to download from the PTES website: www.greatnuthunt.co.uk. The project kicked off officially in October 2009, but will run throughout the winter months.

You can also put up dormouse nest tubes and/or boxes in your own locality. Information on how to make and locate these can be found on web pages such as The Peoples Trust for Endangered Species—www.ptes.org—although a search on the internet provides a wealth of further information.