



Dormouse Biodiversity Action Plan

A Wildthings Species Action Plan
2006–2010

Introduction

The dormouse *Muscardinus avellanarius* is set apart from its relatives, the mice and rats, in that it hibernates and occupies very different habitats above ground in trees and shrubs. It has very specific needs for food and shelter so its habitats are limited to very specific deciduous woodlands and hedgerows. The main habitat requirement for dormice is a varied food supply that is available throughout the active period from February / March through to October / November. It is strictly nocturnal, and except for hibernation, it rarely descends to the ground and is reluctant to cross open spaces. It is therefore very rarely seen, despite its attractive golden-brown fur, long bushy tail and prominent black eyes.

Dormice have a varied diet of flowers and pollen in early summer, fruits, berries, nuts and insects. Certain plants are particularly important at providing this, especially hazel, oak, honeysuckle, bramble and sycamore.

These mice do not normally travel far from their nest (< 70m), so the necessary mix of trees and shrubs must be present within a small area. This implies a very species-rich habitat. Dormice need to be able to travel from tree to tree without having to cross the ground. A continuous shrub layer is therefore ideal. It is essential that the tree canopy does not cast too much shade, since in dark conditions the shrub layer fails to produce sufficient flower and fruits. Actively-coppiced ancient woodland provides the best habitat for dormice.

Dormice are also found in hedgerows, especially those with a diversity of flowering and fruiting shrubs that are infrequently cut, as these provide most abundant food. Hedges are also important dispersal routes and are a vital lifeline linking dormouse populations living in small woodlands or copses. It is essential that hedgerow connections are maintained between small dormouse sites. Mixtures of hawthorn and hazel make very good hedges for dormice, and other species such as honeysuckle and bramble should also be encouraged.

Dormice prefer to build their summer nests above the ground in robust sites such as hollow tree branches and old bird nests. Hence there is a need for some older trees and shrubs (with hollows and rotten branches) to be available. Provision of specially-designed nest boxes, as a substitute for natural nest sites, may double the population density. Bird and bat boxes are often taken over by dormice.



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Current status

Dormouse populations are thought to have declined by around 50% in the last 100 years. The dormouse does not occur in Scotland or Northern Ireland and its core British population is Southern England and Wales. Avon is roughly in the centre of distribution and good populations of dormice exist in the Cotswolds, Lower Woods (South Gloucestershire), the Broadfield Down/Kingswood complex and the Mendips in North Somerset. Very few dormouse records exist for Bath and North East Somerset, although it is unknown whether this is a genuine gap in its distribution as suitable habitat exists. The current records are around the edge of the Mendips.

The Dormouse is legally protected under the Habitats Directive and a licence is needed to kill, injure or disturb them. Their “resting” and breeding sites are also protected.

Current factors causing decline

- Habitat loss through removal for development or agriculture
- Woodland and hedgerow fragmentation, leaving isolated, non-viable populations
- Changes in, or lack of, woodland management
- Increased incursion of stock into woodlands, which graze on saplings thereby inhibiting woodland regeneration
- Housing developments, particularly associated with increased domestic cat numbers
- Loss, lack of management or inappropriate management of hedgerows. Frequent flailing of hedges causes low availability of fruits, and nuts and few nest sites
- Competition from grey squirrels (which feed on very similar foods to the dormouse) is another potential factor, but as yet untested
- Lack of knowledge of whereabouts and value of dormice

Current action

An ongoing project started in 2000 to find and promote dormice in Avon, involving Avon Wildlife Trust, English Nature and the Council. A major part of this was a nest tube survey checking for presence or absence of dormice on various sites throughout Avon. This has provided confirmed dormice records for Bath and North East Somerset.

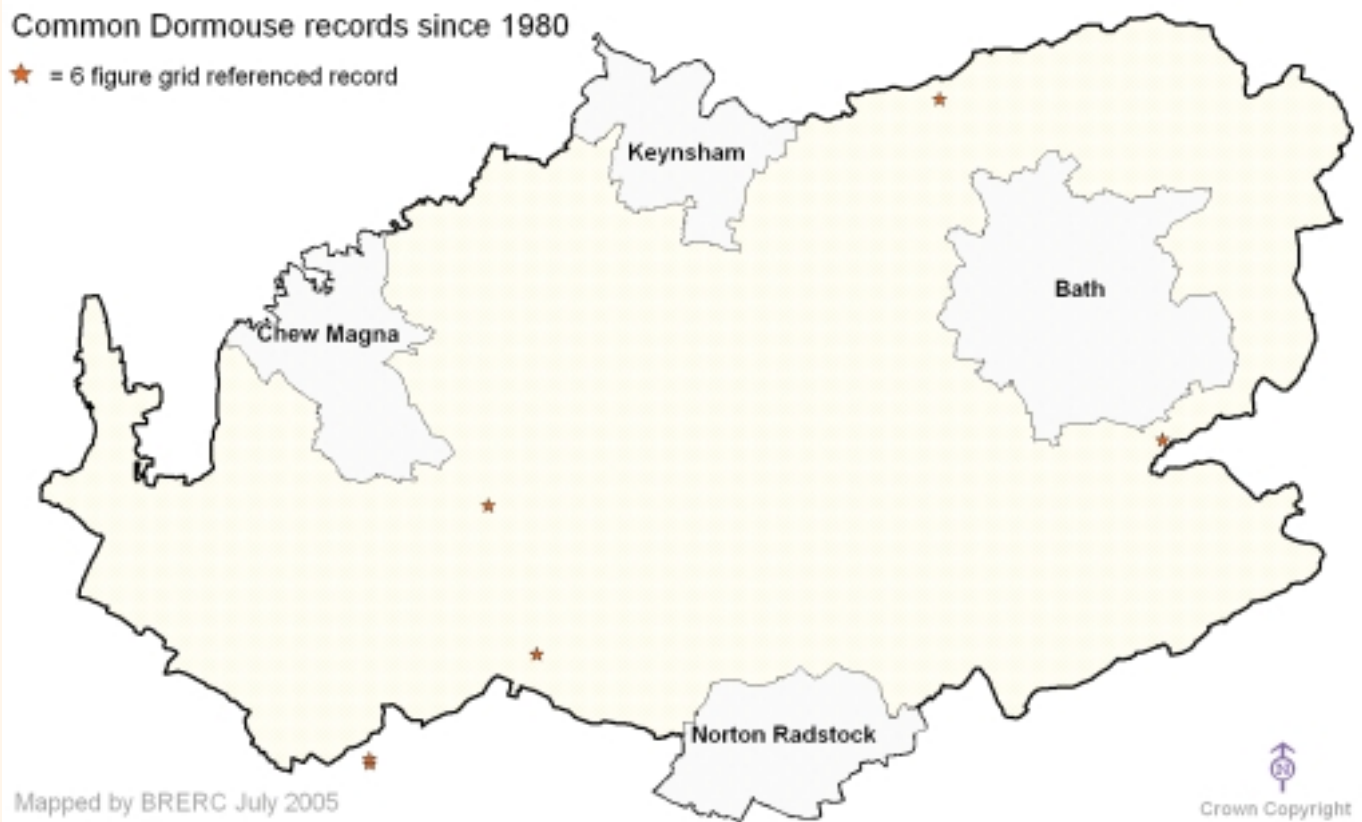
- A dormouse project is underway in Bath & North East Somerset and South Gloucestershire to identify and protect local dormice populations
- English Nature are due to publish a new handbook on dormouse conservation early in 2006
- English Nature and the Council can offer grants to support dormouse conservation initiatives such as habitat management and nest box provision



Distribution map

Common Dormouse records since 1980

★ = 6 figure grid referenced record



- Agri-environment schemes, such as Countryside Stewardship and Environmentally Sensitive Areas initiatives, offer grants for hedge and hedgerow restoration and hedgerow laying where this species is known to occur. (FWAG/AWT)
- New guidance to local authorities on protecting European protected species, including dormice, was issued in 2002 by DEFRA
- The Great Nut Hunt in 1993, co-ordinated by English Nature, was a major national survey of dormice using public participation. It provided information on current distribution of the dormouse and stimulated a great amount of interest in the species. The survey has continued to date and is still promoted by Bath & North East Somerset Council
- A National Dormouse Monitoring Scheme is organised by the Mammal Society. It collates data from key sites in various parts of the country. Its aim is to collect long term data about annual variation in timing and success of breeding and also population density in different habitats and geographical areas
- Dormice are protected under Local Plan Policy in relation to development proposals

Action Plan Objectives

- 1 To maintain dormouse populations in areas where they still occur
- 2 To enhance existing dormouse populations and encourage the spread of dormice through habitat creation to expand and link existing sites
- 3 To survey and review dormouse distributions in Bath and North East Somerset
- 4 To monitor and review dormouse populations
- 5 To raise awareness of dormouse ecology and value

Table of Proposed Actions

Action	Lead	Measurable Outputs	Objectives	Target Date
A. Develop & implement dormouse surveys in B&NES	B&NES AWT	No. of surveys No. of new records	3	2006 onwards
B. Ensure dormice are a central consideration when assessing removal proposals for hedgerows and that licences are applied for where appropriate	B&NES DEFRA EN	No. of licences applied for	1	Ongoing
C. Develop strategy for habitat protection and enhancement of key sites where dormice are present	AWT B&NES FC	Document produced and distributed to relevant people	1,2,5	2006
D. Provide advice on and/or implement dormouse-friendly woodland/scrub management in areas where this species is known to occur	FC FWAG AWT	No. of sites in management Amount of advice given	2	Ongoing
E. Support training in conservation of dormice	B&NES BRERC AWT	No. of training events held	2	2006–2008
F. Collate and disseminate results of dormouse surveys	AWT BRERC	Yearly results produced	3	2006 onwards
G. Promote the great nut hunt	EN AWT B&NES BRERC FWAG	No. of participants taking part	3	Ongoing – Focus 2006
H. Ensure that known dormouse sites are designated as Sites of Nature Conservation Importance	B&NES BRERC	No. of SNCI's with dormouse records	1	2007
I. Develop & implement development framework policies to protect dormice and key habitat features	B&NES	Greater awareness amongst planners and developers	1,2,4	Adopted plan 2006
J. Produce guidance note for developers	B&NES	Guidance note produced	1,2,5	2007
K. Continue to use Biodiversity Action Grant to support dormouse projects	B&NES	No. of projects supported	all	Ongoing
L. Promote study of dormouse ecology and distribution	AWT B&NES CVWG	Greater knowledge	3,4,5	2008
M. Encourage bird and bat box users to monitor use by dormice	CVWG	No. of records produced	3,4	2006
N. Raise awareness public of dormouse ecology & conservation	B&NES CVWG	Greater awareness	5	Focus 2006

AWT – Avon Wildlife Trust; **B&NES** – Bath & North East Somerset Council; **BRERC** – Bristol Regional Environmental Records Centre; **FWAG** – Farming Wildlife Advisory Group; **Wildthings** – Biodiversity Action Plan Partnership for the B&NES area