

Hazel Dormouse

Muscardinus avellanarius (Linnaeus, 1780)

Order: Rodentia

Dormice are mouse-sized, with a long, bushy tail (unique among the smaller mammals), weighing up to 45 g. They are golden or orange brown. Juveniles are greyer. They have prominent black eyes, long whiskers and short, furred ears.

Dormice build nests in scrub and bushes, these are tightly woven balls of stripped honeysuckle bark, leaves and moss, with no obvious entrance. Nests are typically about 10cm in diameter, breeding nests being up to 15cm in diameter. Each individual builds several nests throughout their range. Surveys for dormice often rely on looking for hazel nuts opened by the animals – they use their incisors to enlarge the hole in the nut shell in a characteristic fashion so that the edge of the hole is smooth, unlike the ridged hole left by mice and voles.



Photograph: Jenny Stuart

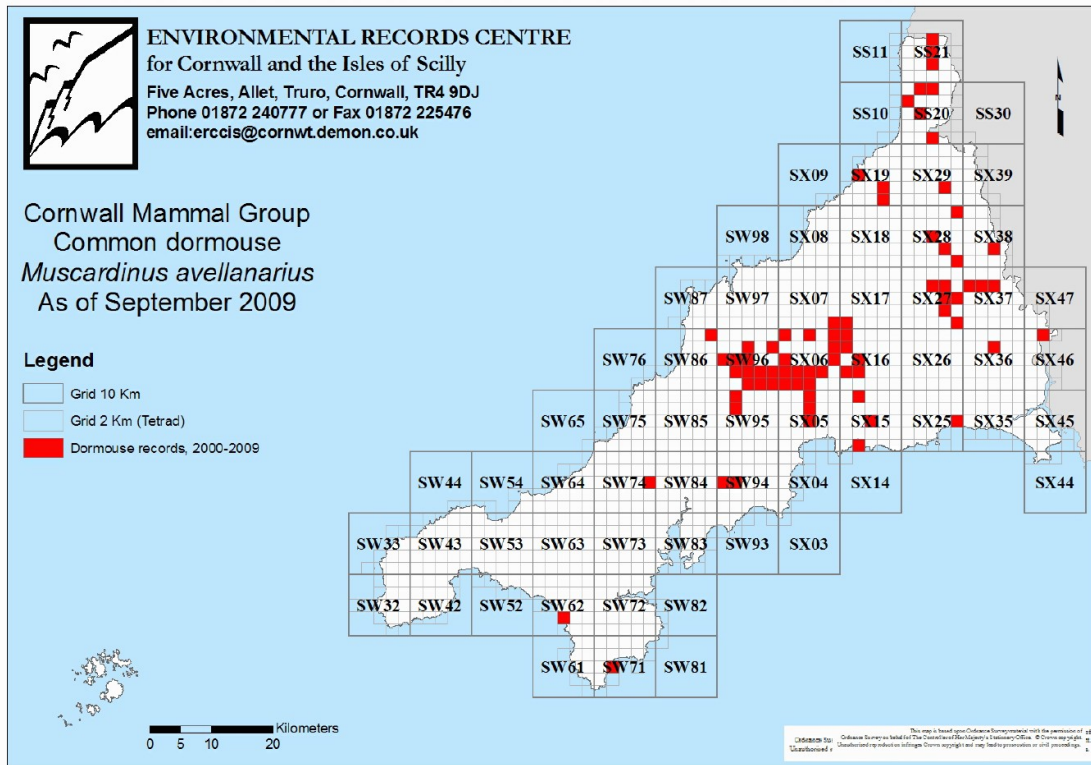
Uniquely among similar mammals, dormice hibernate during the winter (from late October to April or May in Cornwall). They build nests at, or just under, the ground (e.g. in hazel stools, or under leaf litter). Dormice go into a deep torpor, where they slow their metabolism to survive whilst little food available. Even in the summer, dormice may go into torpor for periods to survive temporary food shortages.

After hibernation dormice start their year needing to rapidly increase their weight to prepare for breeding. Dormice often have only 1-2 litters of 2-7 young in a year. Young dormice from the second brood often fail to survive their first hibernation as they have been unable to build up sufficient body weight by the end of the autumn. Dormice live to can live to the grand old age of 5 or 6 years.

Dormice are nocturnal and so are rarely seen in the wild. They have traditionally been considered to inhabit woodlands with a good shrub layer where they spend a lot of their time above the ground. They also need a range of woody plant species to provide them with food such as buds, fruits, nuts, and insects throughout the year. Recent improvements in surveying have found dormice in a wide range of habitats including hedgerows, coniferous plantations, heathland and coastal scrub. They have even been found in the central reservation of the A30 on Bodmin Moor. Dormice will use artificial nest boxes which can support populations where there is a shortage of natural nest sites.

Dormice cannot digest the cellulose in leaves or other vegetative plant material, so they have to rely on other, less abundant food sources. Dormice eat a lot of invertebrate prey, and also flowers and fruits when available. Hazelnuts are considered to provide an important food resource in the autumn when dormice are fattening up for hibernation.

Foxes and badgers will eat hibernating dormice unearthed during their foraging, weasels have been recorded hunting in dormouse nest boxes and occasionally dormouse remains are found in owl and raptor pellets. However no predator specialises in hunting dormice. Domestic cats occasionally bring in dormice. The dormouse's reluctance to leave cover means that habitat fragmentation from development or deer grazing can isolate small populations and make them vulnerable to localised extinction.



There are historic records of dormice throughout Cornwall. Current sites known to support dormice are clustered around mid and east Cornwall, with some sites around Truro. This may result from recording effort further west in the county. Further survey work is required to determine if dormice are still present in the west. Survey work in mid and east Cornwall, combined with population genetics studies are proposed to help us understand more about connections between local populations.

Number of records per date class
 2002 to 2006 inclusive 89
 1997 to 2001 inclusive 29
 All records previous to 1997 81
Total 199

The dormouse is found from Southern Scandinavia from France to the Urals and Asia Minor, it is absent from Spain and the Mediterranean islands

Dormice are normally rare, because their food and habitat requirements are such that they naturally occur at low densities. Reduction and fragmentation of their habitat has further reduced their numbers. Dormice are protected by European and British legislation, and it is an offence to disturb them or to disturb or destroy their habitat without a licence from Natural England. Additionally, dormice are listed as priority species on both the UK and Cornwall Biodiversity Action Plans, with detailed species action plans written for them at both levels.

Survey Methods

- Searching for the characteristically opened remains of hazel nuts
- Artificial nest tubes and boxes
- Searching for nest sites in winter hedgerows

Did you know?

a.k.a. common dormouse, chisel mouse
 The image of the sleepy dormouse has been reinforced by the writings of Lewis Carrol, at the time that he wrote many country children would have kept dormice as pets.
 Dormice have been successfully reintroduced into several sites across England following changes to woodland management.

Key references

Morris, P. & Troughton, G. (2004) Dormice. Whittet Books, London
 Bright, P.W. & Morris, P.A. (2006) Dormice, Mammal Society, London