

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.

