Devon Mammal Group

Christmas Newsletter 2020

Contents:

The DMG Committee:

Chair: Helen Calver
Vice Chair: Phil Collins
Secretary: Charly Mead
Membership: Chris Hughes
Treasurer: Ellie Knott
Media: Rebecca Robinson

Other members:

Sarah Butcher, Stephen Carroll, Kate Hills, Chris Hughes, Hilary Marshall, Jess Smallcombe, Sue Smallshire

Chair's Chat

As we come to the end of the year (and what a year it has been), I would like to focus on some of Devon Mammal Group's highlights from 2020.

Firstly, we are delighted to welcome Jess Smallcombe back to the committee after her maternity leave. Jess officially returned to duties at our December committee meeting.

We were absolutely overwhelmed by the incredibly kind donation of £3,000 made to the Harvest Mouse Project to ensure that our unwaveringly dedicated project officer, Sarah, can continue her work. This donation will ensure that she can plan and organise events for the rest of the 2020/21 season. So far this season several socially distanced training events have taken place, and records of sites surveyed and nests found have been logged. Sarah was particularly thrilled to receive news of the first Harvest Mouse nests being discovered at RHS Rosemoor – a site where previous survey has proved unsuccessful despite there being suitable habitat present. You can read more about the project and upcoming training and surveys on page 5 of this newsletter, and on the Devon Harvest Mouse Project Facebook page

https://www.facebook.com/HarvestMiceDVN

We were lucky enough to host three fantastic talks at the Jurys Inn in Exeter before lockdown restrictions, "Dormice of Dartmoor" by Matt Parkins, "Lesser Horseshoe Bat Mitigation and Monitoring on a Major Road Scheme in South Wales" by Richard Green and "From Monarch of the Glen to King of the Suburbs: The changing behaviour of deer and issues arising" by Jochen Langbein.

We hosted our AGM online in August with a very entertaining "Living with Mammals" talk by Stephen Powles. This was so successful that we have since hosted a further three online talks, "Barbastelle Bats in the Bovey Valley" by Matt Parkins and Tom Williams, "Urban Mammals" by Dawn Scott and "Argument or Negotiation: The search for opportunities to move on from conflict about badgers and culling" by Stephan Price. It has been wonderful to see so many of you logging in, and the use of Zoom has enabled those who can't usually get to the Exeter-based talks to join us. The committee has decided to continue hosting online talks in addition to face-to-face talks in the future, to ensure that all our members have the opportunity to attend.

We will be sending out booking details of our next online talk which takes place on the 19th January, titled "The River Otter Beaver Trial" by Mark Elliott, at the start of the new year.

The committee and I would like to take the opportunity to thank all of our speakers for sharing their time and knowledge with us, and our members for supporting all of the speakers over the past year. We are very grateful to you all.

Finally, I would like to wish you all a happy and healthy Christmas and New Year on behalf of the whole committee.

Helen

Something to look forward to in the New Year!

Our talks so far have brought in record numbers of viewers and so we will continue with them in the New Year. It's great to have such fantastic speakers give their time and we don't have to travel or pay for parking and can lounge around in comfort. A hot drink or glass of something comforting is to hand as well, so there are many benefits to talks on Zoom!

Using Eventbrite is working well, but it does cost us money, so we have reluctantly decided to charge for the forthcoming talks to cover our costs and continue to keep DMG afloat. Our raffles and book sales no longer bring us any income, so we hope you will feel you can still support us by paying £2.50 (members) and £4 (non-members) for your ticket. So here's what we have planned for you in 2021:

Tuesday January 19th at 8pm Returning the Eurasian beaver to Devon (and England)… by Mark Elliott

Tuesday February 16th at 8pm The Private Life of Moles by Derek Crawley – 8pm

Seldom seen, yet everyone knows where they are; difficult to study, but a fascinating lifestyle. Their fur is not used for clothing, it's claimed they Killed King William III and they do not commit suicide on barbed wire! Just some odd things to say about the private life of moles. Derek has sat on the Mammal Society Council and has provided talks and training sessions to an extraordinary number of Local Groups. He is the founder of Staffordshire Mammal Group and the lead author of the Atlas of the Mammals of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, produced this year - https://www.nhbs.com/atlas-of-the-mammals-of-great-britain-and-northern-ireland-book

There is a video of this talk which can be made available to anyone who cannot attend.

March (date TBA) The Devon Bat Project by Anna David

April Annual AGM (talk and date TBA)

N.B. We are sharing our talks with Cornwall Mammal Group, but you will get the first chance to buy tickets so book early. We will then offer tickets to CMG and, depending on the take up, other groups.

Small Grants Scheme

Have you ever wanted to carry out research into mammals but have been prohibited due to costs? The Devon Mammal Group Small Grant Scheme was set up to enable members to carry out research into mammals in Devon. Grants of up to £500 can be awarded to help cover research costs i.e. cameras, traps and other equipment.

To obtain a Grant, the application form should be completed and sent to the DMG Committee for approval. We are keen to encourage applications from our members and will look especially favourably on unusual applications. You do not have to be a student to obtain a grant. In return for funding, recipients will be asked to provide an article for our Newsletter and Website and/or to provide a short talk at one of our events. Our members love to hear about new research!

If you would like to apply for a grant, please complete the application form on our website:

http://devonmammalgroup.org/small-grants-scheme.html

and return it to: charlymead91@gmail.com

Bat detectors ID small mammals

Britain is home to several species of small mammals, which include rats, mice, voles, dormice and shrews. All of these are difficult to observe in the wild and it is usually necessary to capture them to confirm their presence. By describing the vocal repertoire of small mammals in Britain, research published in British Wildlife by a team led by the BTO provides new possibilities for sound identification to be used as a non-invasive survey method.

This has considerable potential to help conservation efforts by providing a cost-effective and robust method for detecting the presence of small mammals (e.g. Hazel Dormouse in woodland, Brown Rats on seabird islands), which could be followed up with more intensive survey work if needed.

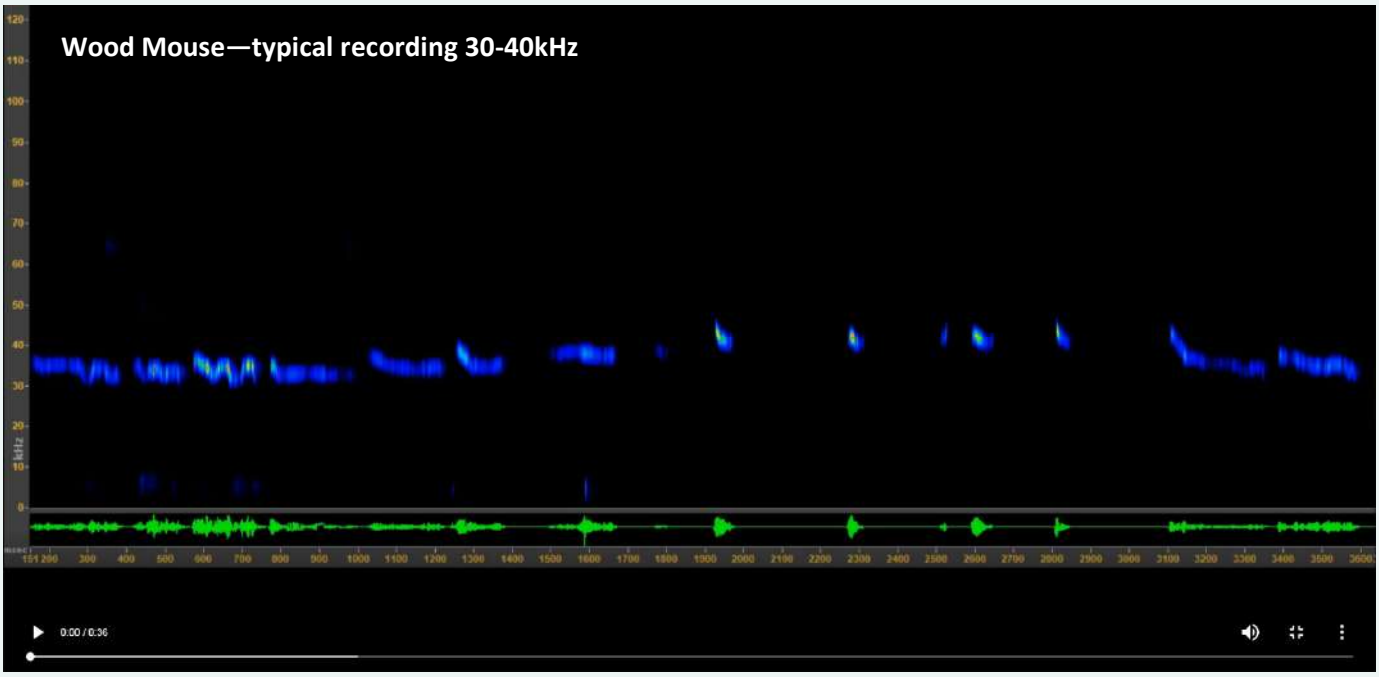
It is likely that large volumes of data on small mammals are already being collected incidentally, but probably unknowingly, across Britain by bat workers using bat detectors. To maximise the value of bat surveys, the (soon to be launched) BTO Acoustic Pipeline plans to improve on the sound identification of bats, whilst also providing results for small mammals and other species groups.

You can access sample audio clips from the link to the BTO below. Clips include a variety of calls from: Wood Mouse, Yellow-necked Mouse, Harvest Mouse, Brown Rat, Black Rat, Hazel Dormouse, Water Vole, Field Vole, Bank Vole, Common Shrew, Pygmy Shrew and Water Shrew.

https://www.bto.org/our-science/publications/peer-reviewed-papers/acoustic-identification-small-terrestrial-mammals?dm_i=IG4,767AK,4MHUZH,T1P4T,1

The findings are reported in the December 2020 issue of British Wildlife. You can access the full article by going to:

https://www.britishwildlife.com/article/volume-32-number-3-page-186-194



Cornwall Seal Project - Lucky Bunting's story

This update covers a very special event. Lucky Bunting was named after a her miraculous rescue from being entangled in fishing nets at the bottom of a cliff. This Rescue was a collaboration between Cornwall Seal Group Research Trust (CSGRT) and the British Divers Marine Life Rescue (Cornwall) in July 2016. For the very first time since then Lucky Bunting has been seen with a pup.

However, Bunting and her pup were on a beach with heavy cliff footfall. We worried that mum would be constantly disturbed and distracted from her baby. At worst this could lead to Bunting being too scared to stay with her pup and swim off. At best it would mean she would miss some feeds. Every missed feed is a loss of about 1% of a pup's total nutritional input. Too many missed feeds means the pup will not make it to its first birthday. Our routine surveyors teamed up with the British Divers Marine Life Rescue Marine Mammal Medics to carry out a 'pup watch' over daylight hours.

It was immediately obvious from the huge activity levels of people during the weekend that bunting would need our help. People were approaching the clifftop and swimming, paddling (or even walking during the biggest spring low tides of the year) round to Lucky Bunting's secret pupping cove on the day that Andy Rogers took this wonderful photo of Bunting feeding her pup.

Our amazing volunteers did three things:

- Recorded the human activity at the site showing just how busy Lucky Bunting's life became
- Gently asked people to stand back to keep out of sight wherever possible
- Talked to the public about who these seals were, why they were extra special and how we could help the pup's chances of survival.

The public's response was phenomenal. People were genuinely delighted to hear these seals' incredible story and lots of people learned about our globally rare Grey Seals for the very first time.

Lucky bunting's celebrity status meant we were never short of volunteers to watch over her, thank goodness. We are massively grateful to everyone who helped out.

Our huge team efforts paid off. Lucky Bunting stayed with her pup, who grew rapidly, becoming a wonderful fat barrel by the time this photo was taken on day 12 by Denise Gent.

Named by consensus, Bunting's pup has been called Little Flag. Sadly without seeing Little Flag moult we were unable to photograph any fur patterning that would have made future identification possible. But, for us, it is enough to know that as partner charities, we have given Little flag the best possible chance of survival.

Sue Sayer (CSGRT Director)

Devon Harvest Mouse Project - latest update

With the end of Lockdown2 we're now back out and about running training sessions, although sadly with such small groups and social distancing there are currently no places I can offer to existing volunteers. As soon as that changes I will let you know. Upcoming sessions include working with the staff at the Grand Western Canal, South West Lakes Trust and Devon Wildlife Trust. I'm hoping to reorganise the West Hawkerland (East Devon) survey for over the Christmas period for a small group, and January for the Dartmoor and Peak Hill (Sidmouth) ones.

How to look for nests!

With the lack of training sessions, here is something slightly different: a three minute long virtual training session instead! Let us show you how to look for the nests of these enchanting little creatures - all you need is a pair of gloves and a tussock of grass…

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nhttOGQriY0&feature=youtu.be

Thanks go to Emma and Fi of the National Trust at Killerton for their help making this video, and for a super morning with 7 nests. The video also features Rosie the dog and the police helicopter!

An interesting find

You may have seen on our last Twitter feed, that we had a record submitted in the centre of Exeter. This was bit of a turn up for the books, as the St Thomas area of the city is the not the first place that would spring to mind for harvest mice, but there is no doubt as to the record. I went searching for nests afterwards, but with so little suitable habitat nearby, it looks like they could be using the railway line through the city. (I'm sure that is asking for someone to draw a cartoon!)

It also goes to show how incredibly important it is to have areas of long grass left for wildlife, as you never know what might turn up or be on the very edge of surviving.

Sarah Butcher (Harvest Mouse Project Officer)

Mountain Hare Project 2021

The Mammal Society has partnered up with NatureScot to work on a joint Mountain Hare project. If you have seen any of their recent announcements about the IUCN compliant Red List you'll know that sadly the Mountain Hare is one of the British mammals which is now at risk of extinction.

Mountain hare by Shane Stanbridge

The project is due to launch in Spring 2021 and part of the planning process has involved making adaptations to the Mammal Mapper app to allow users to log more detailed reports about mountain hare sightings. TMS are making changes to the app to allow users to record upland birds too. This is a fantastic development as it means that the app is even more useful for mammal mappers and has huge potential for other organisations requiring data on bird presence/absence. Watch this space (as well as social media and The Mammal Society website) for more news. In the meantime, why not take a minute to familiarise yourself with Mountain Hare signs and characteristics by taking a look at the mammal hub? https://www.mammal.org.uk/species-hub/full-species-hub/discover-mammals/species-mountain-hare/

Better still, if you are visiting the Peak district or Scotland, check them out!

Dormice are changing their habits as our weather patterns change.

Those of us that do regular dormouse surveys are finding new nests later and later into the season. Over several years I have come across new nests in tubes and boxes in November.

Recently, after finding a single nest in a tube in June I put up boxes at a local nature reserve and monitored them each month to see if any Dormice had moved in. They remained empty, as did my other monitoring tubes and in October I assumed I wouldn't be seeing any more nests this season. Having for some years now left survey tubes in place until the end of November, as I was aware that new nests sometimes appeared as late as this, I decided to have one more look this November. Imagine my delight when I found 4 new nests and two very lively Dormice.

There have been a number of sightings of hungry Dormice on bird tables and feeders for some years now, long after they should have gone into hibernation. Several have also been recorded trapped inside feeders, having gorged themselves on the nuts and seeds inside. One such sighting (from the Isle of Wight) made the news recently. He was rescued and released into a safe place.

These two cuties were found in a bird box at Stover Country Park when the ranger was ringing chicks in the spring. Many dormice are now being found torpid in the late spring during box checks.

Sue Smallshire

Strangers in a Strange Land - Dormice in gardens

Rare, elusive, nocturnal, may live in teapots: some common thoughts about the uncommon Hazel dormouse *Muscardinus avellanarius*. Dormouse ecology is characterised as sequential foraging on seasonal, temporarily available flowers, insects, nuts and fruit, which, combined with limited dispersal, gives a patchy, low density distribution, largely restricted to species-rich coppice woodland and hedges. Dormouse populations also turn up in other places1 : conifer plantations, heathland, culm grassland, reedbeds, patches of isolated scrub, and gardens, which prompts some questions: - how do they get to these places? Why do they stay? What can they be eating? And how important are these sites compared to woodland and hedge habitats?

Aided by a DMG small grant, I tried to investigate this further in partnership with Devon Biodiversity Records Centre (DBRC). Dormice are widely recorded in Devon: categorising by habitat type, the numbers of the 700+ dormouse records currently held at DBRC comprise c.300 from woodland; 80 from non-woodland; 170 from gardens (including garden hedges); 160 from other hedges / other unspecified. The largest subset is from domestic gardens, and these were chosen for further study, as representative of a novel, fragmented habitat in the wider landscape.

Between 1999 - 2009, over 110 different garden records were reported to DBRC from 82 sites, stimulated partly by a DBRC / Devon Wildlife Trust public engagement project appealing for garden sightings 2006 - 8. With the kind permission of garden owners, many of these sites were re-visited. To complement site surveys, aerial photographs were analysed with GIS software. Could the presence of dormice in unfamiliar, patchy garden habitat be linked to the presence of woodland, certain garden features, or connecting hedgerows nearby?

Stephen Carroll

To read all about this fascination project and its findings go to:

http://test.devonmammalgroup.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/02/DMG-grant-report-draft-dormice-in-gardens.pdf

Does shipping threaten whale conservation?

Marine mammals are a diverse category, including whales, dolphins, porpoises, seals, sea lions, walruses, manatees, dugongs and even sea otters and polar bears. Their classification is unique, in that they are grouped based on their shared aquatic environment rather than shared evolutionary origins. Marine mammals are also special in that they are often dubbed 'charismatic megafauna' due to capturing the affection of the public. Despite this popularity, these animals face a multitude of human threats.

If you were asked what the biggest threats are to marine mammals, you may think of well-publicised issues like commercial whaling, plastic consumption, or even entanglement in fishing gear. Animals being hit by ships ('ship strikes') may not be high up on that list, or even on it. Many may assume that ships are so big and loud that animals would notice them and get out of the way, and wonder how likely a collision is to happen in such a big ocean environment.

These are the questions that I'm challenged with answering during my PhD project at the University of Portsmouth. We already know from other studies that large whales are likely the most frequently hit marine mammals globally. Some species are particularly at risk, including the North Atlantic Right Whale, which was once widespread but decimated by historic commercial whaling. Although whaling has ceased across its range, the North Atlantic Right Whale continues to be unsustainably killed by entanglement in fishing gear and collisions with vessels. While this species is well-studied, there are huge gaps in our knowledge about the risk ship strikes pose to other species outside of a handful of well-studied areas.

You can read more about this revealing study by December Student of the Month, James Robbins at: https://www.mammal.org.uk/2020/12/does-shipping-threaten-whale-conservation/ ***James Robbins***

The secret light of Australia's Marsupials

The discovery that bilbies, bandicoots, Tasmanian devils and echidnas emit bio-fluorescence under UV light has sparked the burning question. Why?

Under the UV light, creatures including bilbies, bandicoots, wombats, flying foxes, microbats, Tasmanian devils and echidnas all took on a distinct disco-like glow.

Researchers had shone a UV light at two stuffed platypuses collected from Tasmania – one dating back to 1889 – and kept at the Field Museum of Natural History in Chicago. The animals glowed back at them.

Now scientists are asking why. Was the glowing fur an evolutionary leftover, or was it somehow useful for Australia's marsupials and other animals?

Bare-nosed Wombats under ultraviolet light.
Photograph: Western Australian Museum

Monotremes are a curious order of egg-laying mammals that live only in New Guinea and Australia – the platypus and four species of echidna. Their fur glowed green and cyan under different UV lights that shine at different wavelengths. This, the researchers said, was "the first report of bio-fluorescence in a monotreme mammal under UV light."

To read more about this fascinating discovery follow the link below or just Google '**the platypuses were glowing'**.

https://www.theguardian.com/science/2020/dec/19/tasmanian-devils-glow-in-the-dark-australian-animals-glowing-platypus-wombat-echidna-bandicoot-scientists-investigate-australia-marsupials-light#:~:text=Researchers%20had%20shone%20a%20UV,Now%20scientists%20are%20asking%20why.