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Chair's Chat

Welcome to the spring edition of the DMG 2023 newsletter.

We hope the new year has started on a healthy and positive note for you all. We very much enjoyed seeing some of you face to face again at our recent talks and at the Christmas Quiz. We greatly appreciate your continued support for events both in person and online.

Despite the recent heavy rains and sudden freezing weather, there are clear signs of spring emerging. The days are starting to lengthen, early spring flowers are beginning to make an appearance, and it won't be long before our native hibernating species start searching for food and breeding sites. I personally am looking forward to heading back out to the woods to see our dormice and bats in May.

The committee is hard at work putting together our upcoming programme of talks and events, which will be issued soon. We are always happy to receive suggestions for speakers, or events from our wonderful members, and do send us your tales of wildlife encounters too.

We look forward to seeing you soon.

Helen Calver (Chair - DMG)

What did we do in 2022

Well, it would seem that we managed to fill the year with some exciting events and surveys.

Members, Ellie and Hilary, carried out professional Otter surveys in the Southwest for the Sixth English Otter Survey and Sarah continued her fabulous work on the Harvest Mouse Project. We can now confirm that this will continue for at least another year.

Dr Craig Shuttleworth gave a talk on Pine Martens and Ellie Knott stepped up at the eleventh hour to talk about the Otter Survey of England, after Stephen Powles went down with Covid.

We had an evening of Dormice where Matt Parkins and Charlotte Armitage and Ellie Scopes gave us an overview of their fantastic work on the species.



We promoted DMG at the Meldon Festival and finally we held a 'Quizmas' quiz, where Hilary kept us on our toes with a challenging set of questions!

Thanks to everyone who supported us!



On thin ice

Walrus are an iconic species of marine mammal split into two subspecies, the Atlantic and Pacific Walrus. Growing up to 1.5 tonnes in weight, their large size allows them to withstand the cold and thrive in freezing conditions.



Jack Bucknall @WhitleyBirder

While they are now mostly found in the Arctic Circle and its surrounding waters, they previously lived much further south. One of the oldest walrus fossils was found during dredging of San Francisco's harbour and dates back to around 27,500 years ago when the last Ice Age was at its height. As these ice sheets retreated north, walrus followed them. The mammals are reliant on ice to serve a range of their needs, including resting, breeding and travelling.

Over time, the more southerly populations have been wiped out as a result of human hunting, with remaining populations generally found in the more inaccessible regions of the far north. While they are now protected in much of their range, sea ice loss and oil exploration continue to threaten their populations. This loss of habitat has forced walrus to travel further to find food and a place to rest. Populations now frequently rest on land, and are forced to swim up to 160 kilometres (100 miles) to look for food. As ice becomes even more scarce, Walrus may be forced further south in the hunt for a place to live and food to eat.



Patricia Steven/Pete Hicks

During 2022 we had no less than three Walrus visiting ours, and neighbouring coastlines. Three animals, nicknamed Wally, Freya and Thor, have all spent time far from their home ground.

Wally, identified from scars on both his front flippers and first spotted in Ireland has been seen along the coast of Europe, including Spain, France, Wales, the Isles of Scilly, and Cornwall. A purpose-built pontoon was made for him in Scilly in a bid to reduce the damage he caused by climbing on boats.

This New Year Thor, a juvenile male, parked himself on a Slipway in Scarborough harbour. He had been spotted earlier in December on the Hampshire coast. Scarborough Council decided to cancel its New Year fireworks display as part of a multi-agency effort to stop him getting agitated or coming to harm. According to a report from the British Divers Marine Life Rescue (BDMLR) thousands of people visited the harbour to get a glimpse of him, with up to 500 people

behind the cordon at any one time.

This understandable enthusiasm to actually see such an unusual and enigmatic mammal has not been without its problems. Persuading people to behave sensibly can be a challenge and various groups including the RSPCA and the Wildlife Trusts have been quick to set up cordons to protect the animals. Sadly this did not prove successful in the case of Freya, a female who turned up at Oslo Fjord last July.



Freya had already been sighted in the UK, the Netherlands Denmark and Sweden before choosing to spend part of the summer in Norway.

There was outrage when officials said that they were considering euthanising the Walrus because repeated appeals to the public to keep their distance had been in vain. Curious onlookers continued to approach her, with children in tow, to take photos until finally she was killed causing an international outcry. "The decision to euthanise was taken on the basis of a global evaluation of the persistent threat to human security" the head of Norway's fisheries directorate, Frank Bakke-Jensen, said in a statement.



There is no doubt that disturbance to sea mammals by an increasing number of people has become a real problem. With the urge to post on social media, quality cameras on phones and the availability of cheap drones, there seems to be a desperation to get as close to wildlife as possible, without much consideration of the damage it causes.

This photo shows how irresponsibly locals were prepared to behave. How could this have been allowed to happen?

Sue Smallshire

A View from the North



As a mammal enthusiast visiting my sister, Hilary Marshall, in Devon from my home in the north of Scotland, I thought it might be interesting to draw some comparisons between the mammal fauna, and the experience of mammal recording, in the two areas. (Note: in this context when I say 'Highland' I mean the area administered by the Highland Council - which is our Highland Biological Recording Group recording area.)

First off - how many more mammal species you have, here in the south-west! Here, I am considering terrestrial mammals only, not cetaceans. Whilst our Highland Mammal Atlas includes 38 species 6 of which are bats, the Devon Mammal fauna (from a quick look at the Mammal Society's recent national Atlas) has 47 species, including 16 bats. - A particular bonus for me was spending a while observing lesser horseshoe bats emerging from Hilary's attic one evening, via a hole left in the gable end for barn owls.

Whilst both areas share the commoner small rodents (wood mouse, field vole, bank vole) extras to look out for in Devon are Dormouse and Harvest Mouse. I was interested to examine Hilary's carefully-saved Harvest Mouse nest, with its intricately woven grass blades and 'bouncy' texture. Having seen the real thing will make it much easier to follow up two recent records of Harvest Mouse, one from the north coast of Sutherland and one from the Cairngorms area – the first records from the Highland recording area in recent history!

On a short local woodland walk, Hilary and I quickly racked up quite a list of mammals from signs we observed: otter spraints at the ford where the road crosses the river; a Fox scat full of blackberry pips, which smelled more like blackberry jam than a typical Fox scat; plenty of deer tracks and droppings, plus signs of browsing in the woods; some Beaver-chewed twigs in the river. These were all things which I could also see on my home patch (or nearby).



One thing which shocked me was the number of empty, disused Badger setts following the culls. I last visited this wood a few years ago, when the setts were active and the wood was criss-crossed with busy Badger paths. This year the remaining Badger(s?) seemed to have been heading out into the adjacent cereal field, possibly to glean grain when earthworms were inaccessible due to the drought. According to DEFRA, over 800 Badgers were culled across this 10km square 2002-5 and whilst 2762 were culled in Devon in 2021 the locations do not appear to be in the public domain. Culling is something which does not happen in Scotland, where bovine TB is pretty-well absent.

Moving on to another large and contentious mammal, Beavers are present in both Devon and the Scottish Highlands. The bulk of the Scottish population has arisen from escapes or unauthorised introductions, mainly in the Tay catchment, rather than from the 'official' reintroduction site in Argyll. The Tay population is reckoned to be increasing by 30% per year, and has now spread over into the Forth catchment. Following public outcry over the number of licences issued to 'remove' beavers for causing damage to land-owning interests, the Scottish Government has recently agreed to pursue a policy of relocating them to agreed receptor sites wherever possible, in preference to lethal control. Licence returns for 2021 showed that 87 beavers were killed and 33 relocated in that year. Hopefully the number being killed will diminish under the new policy.



As for mammals which we have but you don't (yet), I understand moves are afoot to possibly reintroduce pine martens to Devon. Whilst they will be a delightful addition to the fauna, experience in Scotland suggests that you will have to reinforce your chicken runs against such an intelligent, agile and bold predator. – Several of my neighbours have lost free-range chickens to Pine Martens in broad daylight. One is even contemplating building an electrified hen run along the lines of the gamebird release pen design put forward by the Vincent Wildlife Trust!

One aspect which makes observing and recording mammals easier in Scotland is the Scottish Outdoor Access Code, which was implemented by law in 2005. This is not, as is often believed, a 'right to roam', but a right of responsible access. The responsibility has to be observed by both the landowner and the access-taker. This means that for personal mammal-recording and other natural history observations, one can mostly walk freely across most landscapes, rather than having to stick to public Rights of Way and 'open access land' as in England. However, for organised surveys and surveys undertaken by consultants in advance of development proposals, permission from the landowner is still required.

As for submitting records and making them available to those who need them, the advantage seems to lie with Devon. From my online investigations, you appear to have a properly-funded and staffed Biodiversity Records Centre – something we can only dream of in Highland! Our database is managed by a volunteer with a laptop, although we have had funding over a number of years from Scottish Natural Heritage (now called 'NatureScot') to prepare and upload our records to the NBN Atlas.

So if any of you are visiting the Highland area please do send in any mammal records via the Highland Biological Recording Group website. www.hbrg.org.uk

References:

Crawley, D, Coomber, F, Kubasiewicz, L, Harrower, C, Evans, P, Waggitt, J, Smith, B & Mathews, F (2020) *Atlas of the Mammals of Great Britain and Northern Ireland*. Pelagic Publishing. ISBN: 978-1-78427-204-3

Scott, R (Ed.) (2011) *Atlas of Highland Land Mammals*. Highland Biological Recording Group. ISBN: 978-0-9552211-3-2

Ro Scott (2022)

In Praise of Rats

Brown Rats



Well, somebody has to give it a go!

Let's start with a confession: I rather like rats. They certainly make good pets (ask my daughter), albeit smelly ones (ask her fiancé!). My Uncle Walter used to breed rats and many other animals, mostly to supply to educational establishments for dissection. They were housed in a large shed in his garden, which I loved to explore with him. The rats were his favourites, by far. But sadly they're not everyone's favourites. Is this justified, I wonder?

I suspect that most people have an almost inherent disgust of rats that, as with a general view of Wolves, comes from centuries of often ill-founded fear. Yes, rats are commensal creatures that have pillaged our farm products for centuries

and taken advantage of our messy habits and discarded waste. These days, rats often eat the spillage from garden bird feeders or tuck into food waste put onto compost heaps, thereby bringing them as close again to householders as they were in the days of the Black Death.

Plague has been killing people for over five millennia, so I suppose we've had every reason to hate rats ... or have we? A recent article about Ship (Black) Rats in *British Wildlife* by renowned mammologist Stephen Harris has confirmed what I learned years ago from QI (which busts so many myths!): we laid the blame for plague wrongly on rats. Many naturalists will be aware that it was actually the fleas present on Ship Rats that transmitted the deadly bacteria, and maybe that this well-named species helped to spread plague around the world. But after unwittingly transporting the fleas and the bacteria to new places, transmission from them was likely due mainly to human parasites (body lice and human fleas) and aerosol infections (I guess face-masks weren't advised during plague outbreaks!).

Common (Brown or Norway) Rats can also spread diseases, notably Weil's Disease (Leptospirosis), which is why it's important to cover open wounds when dabbling in watercourses. A cousin of mine who had a passion for underground exploration managed to catch it, but it's uncommon in Britain. Humans have waged war against only three invasive species of rats worldwide: Ship, Common and Polynesian. Rats are difficult to trap, because they are neophobic (they avoid objects that are new to them), so Warfarin baits became the preferred method of control from the 1920s until the 'second generation anticoagulant rodenticides' (SGAR) came into use in the 1970s. SGARs are much more concentrated and rats will take on much more than a lethal dose in one feed. Unless dead and dying rats are collected daily they pose a threat to non-target organisms, such as raptors and owls, which may be killed or lose their sensory acuity if they eat just part of a poisoned rodent (I believe SGARs are the reason for reduced numbers of Kestrels and Barn Owls). So poisoning rats kills not just rats.

Ship Rats are now rare in Britain, although information from pest controllers suggests not as rare as the mammal atlas suggests, but we are told that we are never more than a few metres from a Common Rat (or is that another myth?). One estimate suggests that humans outnumber rats in Britain by six to one – so which of us exists in 'plague proportions', eh? There hasn't been a case of plague in Britain for over 100 years, so perhaps it's time we took a more relaxed views of one of our commonest mammals. We probably have Common Rats living in our garden – certainly they've produced (very cute) young in burrows by a drain cover – but we see them rarely and it's mostly the corpses that our neighbours' cats very kindly provide us with that remind us that they're still around. And I'm grateful that, along with the Hedgehogs and Dunnocks, they help to clean up the mess that those 'horrible' Goldfinches toss onto the floor. Or am I just being biased there?



Dave Smallshire



Saving Britain's Wildlife



Searching for Shrews

We're on the lookout for the Greater White-toothed Shrew

The purpose of this project is to increase monitoring of small mammals in Great Britain, especially shrews. The Greater White-toothed Shrew (GWTS) has now been identified in Sunderland and is known to be an invasive species in Ireland, at the detriment of the Pygmy Shrew (a native species in the British Isles). We need to increase monitoring of small mammals to understand their baseline population and distribution status so that the effect of GWTS introductions on native small mammals can be determined, especially of Pygmy Shrews.

The GWT shrew (*Crocidura russula*) is native to Europe, North Africa and some Channel Islands. It is very similar in size to the common shrew but has prominent ears and long white hairs on the tail.

In October 2022, DNA analysis of a shrew carcass showed the GWT to be present in the Sunderland area, North-East England. Further analysis of photographs suggested they may have been present in that area since at least 2015.

The GWT shrew was first recorded in Ireland in 2007 (where only the pygmy shrew is present) and it appears to outcompete the pygmy shrew, which has disappeared from areas where the GWT shrew now occurs. It is therefore possible that the GWT shrew will negatively affect, or completely displace our smallest native mammal, the pygmy shrew.

The GWT shrew is a new non-native species in Britain and might become invasive. We need to confirm its presence in the wild, find out how far it has spread, and determine whether it is affecting the abundance of pygmy shrews. The Mammal Society and MammalWeb are promoting ways to record the presence of all shrews, so they can monitor GWT shrew distribution and any changes to pygmy shrew abundance.

Shrews are hard to find and it can be difficult to distinguish between species without a close-up view! This is why The Mammal Society created some easy identification sheets to help you which can be found on their website.

www.mammal.org.uk/searching-for-shrews

What should I do if I think I have seen a GWT shrew?

TMS encourage anyone to report sightings of live or dead shrews with photographic evidence through either *Mammal Mapper*, or *MammalWeb*. Sightings without photos can be reported through *Mammal Mapper*, but the exact species cannot be verified.

SEARCHING FOR SHREWS

WE'RE ON THE LOOK OUT FOR THE GREATER WHITE-TOOTHED SHREW

In October 2022 the greater white-toothed shrew (GWTS) was discovered in Great Britain by DNA analysis.

The GWTS is known to be an invasive species in Ireland, negatively affecting the Pygmy shrew population.

This could be a problem for our native population of Pygmy shrews, which is why we need your help!

GREATER WHITE-TOOTHED SHREW IDENTIFICATION

Reddish greyish brown fur, light brown underneath

Size 60 - 90 mm and weight 5 - 14 g

Pointed nose

Long tail with long white hairs

Prominent ears

Like the name indicates they have white teeth, compared to all of our native species that have red teeth!

HOW CAN YOU HELP?

- If you see a shrew record it!
- Upload a photo of the shrew with a scale into Mammal Mapper, a free Mammal Society app,
- Set up small mammal camera traps and upload your footage to MammalWeb
- Carry out owl pellet analyses and record your photos and findings on Mammal Mapper

Mark Hows from Cambridge Mammal Group has produced this excellent guide to identifying scarce shrews.

www.cambsmammalgroup.org.uk



Mark Hows
Cambridgeshire Mammal Group

British Shrew ID – Scarce Shrews

The ID of these species can largely be determined by location

Millet's Shrew (Crowned Shrew) - *Sorex coronatus*

ID Features:- Similar to common shrew but a little smaller, tricolour in appearance, dark brown to grey on top, pale brown sides with pale underbelly. Thin pointed nose, small eyes and ears. The top jaw / nose is proportionally longer than common shrew.

Size:- 62-80mm, tail approx. 60% of body

Weight:- 7-12g

Distribution:- Only on Jersey where Common Shrew is absent



Greater White toothed - *Crocidura russula*

ID Features:- Reddish Greyish brown fur, light underneath. Long tail with long obvious hairs. Prominent ears, pointed nose. White teeth.

Size:- 60-90mm, tail approx. 50% of body

Weight:- 5-14.5g

Distribution:- Alderney / Guernsey / SE Republic of Ireland



Lesser White Toothed Shrew - *Crocidura suaveolens*

ID Features:- Reddish Greyish brown fur, light underneath. Long tail with long obvious hairs. Prominent large ears, pointed nose. White teeth.

Size:- 50-75mm, tail approx. 50% of body length

Weight:- 3-7g

Distribution:- Scilly Isles / Jersey and Sark only





Mark Hamblin/2020VISION

Bringing back Pine Martens to Devon

After an absence of 150 years, Pine Martens could be about to return to the South West of England. This is the aim of the **Two Moors Pine Marten Project**.

The goal of the Project is to restore healthy populations of Pine Martens to the South West. Once a common part of our region's woodlands, Pine Martens became extinct throughout most of England and Wales in the nineteenth century.

Where and when will the first pine martens be released?

The project is currently working with experts and local communities to determine the potential impacts of pine martens on other native species, agriculture, and woodland management, to establish where and whether the reintroduction could take place. Possible release sites are being considered in Dartmoor and Exmoor National Parks. The aim would be to release the first animals in 2024.

Why do we need Pine Martens back?

Their absence has left our local wildlife without a vital functioning part. As predators of small animals, Pine Martens play a vital role in balancing nature, especially in our woodlands. Their return to this area would be a positive step in restoring the fortunes of local wildlife, at a time when it faces huge challenges.

www.devonwildlifetrust.org/bringing-back-pine-martens



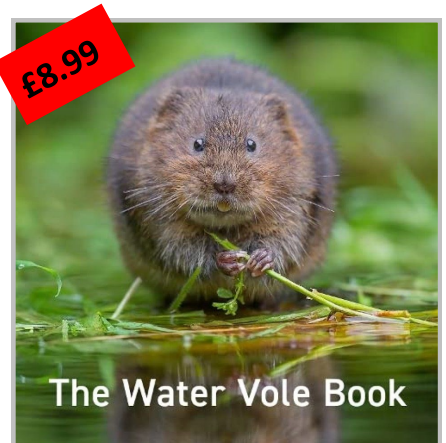
Devon
Wildlife Trust

BOOK CORNER

These are some recently published and updated books



The Water Vole Book by Hugh Warwick is an ideal guide to its subject for all nature lovers, beautifully illustrated throughout with brand new photography and artwork. Due out in March and available for pre-order from NHBS. www.nhbs.com



The Beaver Book by Hugh Warwick
Sections include: What is a Beaver? Beaver Life, Beaver Engineering. People and Beavers, Beaver Reintroductions Beaver Trust, Myths and Legends, Art, Literature and Advertising.
www.graffeq.com

The Bats of Britain and Ireland
By HW Schofield and AJ Mitchell-Jones

This is an excellent little introduction and identification guide to 14 species of bat found throughout Britain and Ireland. Each species description covers roosts, food & feeding, breeding, status & distribution, and identification. Similar species are listed alongside each other.
NHBS. www.nhbs.com





Harvest Mouse project,

January update

We're now (amazingly!) just over half way into this year's Harvest Mouse project! We got off to a super start with our new map swiftly being covered in a scattering of yellow hectads where nests have been found. Although the festive period, with all its rain, led to an unusually quiet period for results, so far this season we have had already received over 30 nest reports.

The weather has made things a bit more tricky with having to rearrange events, but sometimes tenacity is well worth it. Our most recent survey, cancelled the first time due to heavy rain and flooding, the second time due to snow and ice, resulted in an amazing nine nests: the largest number so far for one site this year. If anyone in Devon can beat that I'd love to know!

Training sessions have been quieter this year with less demand, but we've had good sessions, including one on Dartmoor with the National Trust and DWT's Saving Devon's Treescapes project at Meeth. We've had more group surveys than normal though, with sessions all over the county, from Trinity Hill, Axminster to St.Giles on the Heath: virtually touching both borders. The next few weeks look pretty busy too, with surveys and training sessions in South Devon, Buckfastleigh, Northam Burrows and the North Devon AONB.



Do keep looking at our Twitter feed (@harvestmiceDVN) and Facebook page to find out what else we're doing, or email me on harvestmouse@devonmammalgroup.org if by any chance you are not one of the 300 plus people on our mailing list but would like to be! If you find a nest, whether as an incidental find or during a deliberate survey, please do let us know on <https://www.surveymonkey.co.uk/r/B9P7B6G>

There you'll see the latest photos from our amazing camera traps, which recently have included weasels, three shrew species, lots of voles and most importantly harvest mice! Huge thanks for to our three volunteers Jon, Liz and Pascal for helping host these cameras. We have 5 cameras out at the moment, and without their help topping up food and uploading photos it would be a mammoth task.

Funding-wise, things are still looking a bit tricky. The project is funded this year through memberships (thank you!) as we weren't successful in getting funding. We have a couple of applications in the pipeline for next year, but at the beginning of the season it looked like this one might well, and still could be, our last one. Please keep your fingers crossed for us that we can keep this nationally-recognised project going. Only this week we have had meetings with the Mammal Society and their equivalent in Switzerland, and it's very humbling to hear how highly regarded the project is.

Sarah Butcher

Harvest Mouse Project Officer

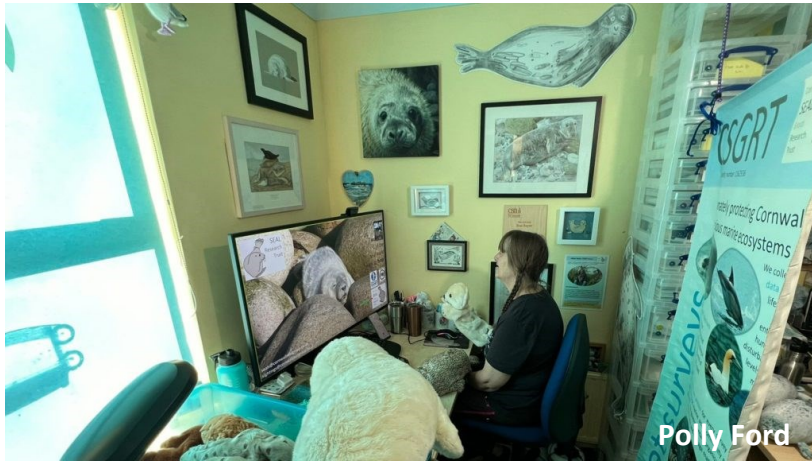


It's an MBE for Sue Sayer!

Sue Sayer, Founder and Director of the Cornwall Seal Group Research Trust (CSGRT), also known as the Seal Research Trust (SRT) nationally, has been awarded an MBE in the New Year's Honours 2023. Sue has dedicated over 20 years to marine conservation and in particular the UK's native seal species. Her volunteer dedication, leadership and passion have inspired the hundreds of volunteers that assist Sue in her quest to make the marine environment a healthier, more economically vibrant and protected place for all of us to enjoy.



Terry Carn



Polly Ford

Sue has been a driving force for change. Coordinating scientific evidence to inform marine conservation, Sue has concentrated her efforts into delivering learning experiences for all age groups right across the UK. She even gave her first talk in Asia in 2022. Sue's book *Seal Secrets* has just been updated and will be reprinted in 2023. She delivers inspiring school, college, university, community and specialist programmes in her unique, animated and passionate way that leaves people smiling and wanting to learn more. The photo left show her delivering a remote Zoom talk for Key Stage 1 pupils in Yorkshire.

Sue helps others to set up their own groups and then supports them by providing advice and guidance on a local, regional and national basis. Her work continues to influence cleaner and healthier policies that protect the environment and us – giving us all the chance of a liveable planet in the future.

The photo right shows Sue illustrating the issues of lost fishing gear on seals to Simon Reeve

The photo below shows her with SRT patron Gillian Burke.



Sarah Millward

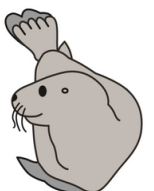


Billy Heaney

When asked to comment on her award Sue said "I am still overwhelmed and, rather unusually, a little lost for words with this award. It is very humbling. I represent a massive team effort and this MBE is an incredible validation of the value of what we all do together! We put seals first and give them a voice, representing them through science as well as rational, sensible and thought-provoking engagement. I could not be more proud. Thank you to everyone who has made this happen".

To read more and to support Cornwall Seal Group: www.cornwallsealgroup.co.uk

Cornwall
SEAL
Group
Research
Trust





Sussex Bat Group

Extinct bat making comeback!

A second Greater Mouse-eared Bat was found in Sussex this January!

In 1992, the greater mouse-eared was declared extinct in the UK, but in 2002 a single male was found in a network of tunnels in West Sussex, where it has been known to hibernate for the last 20 years.

A second bat was found in those same tunnels earlier in January by Sussex Bat Group.

The bat group said the find was a "hugely important discovery, and demonstrates the importance of regular monitoring of bat colonies. We could have missed this highly significant find" group spokesperson Sheila Wright said. "It also shows how important it is to safeguard these hibernation sites for bats."

The discovery was made during this year's National Bat Monitoring Programme, which Ms Wright said was vital to mammal conservation efforts, required due to the threat from anthropological pressures such as roost loss, habitat loss and fragmentation.

It is believed that the newly found greater mouse-eared bat was a vagrant that had crossed the channel from France, where there is an established population, and took up residence in Britain.

Adventurous Beaver

Imagine his surprise, when birder and wildlife photographer, Tim Ridgeway, came across this Beaver swimming around Turf Locks on the Exeter Canal.

The Beaver eventually found its way into the lock and had to be rescued, but it is possible evidence that Beavers have found their way into the Exeter Canal and possibly into the River Exe catchment.



"Beavers are the most amazing animals, capable of transforming our rivers and wetlands for the better" say the Devon Wildlife Trust. "Our work on the River Otter Beaver Trial, and the work of The Wildlife Trusts elsewhere, has shown that these natural engineers can provide an impressive range of services from storing climate-changing carbon to flood alleviation. We believe it's a top priority for nature's recovery to see their return to rivers across the UK".

Request for articles

We are always looking new material for our newsletter and would like to invite you to send in any interesting mammal sightings or encounters you may have had, as well as news of ongoing wildlife projects that may be of interest to our readers.

We would like the newsletter to reflect the ideas and experiences of all our readers

Please send you articles and suggestions to: Sue Smallshire suesmallshire@gmail.com