

JANUARY 2024

DEVON MAMMAL GROUP NEWSLETTER



CHAIR'S CHAT

Greetings to members and friends of Devon Mammal Group. As we step into a new year, I am honoured to address you as the new chairperson. I extend my heartfelt gratitude to Helen for her dedicated leadership during her time as chairperson at Devon Mammal Group.

What an exciting year we have ahead of us as Devon sees many new mammal projects taking shape across the county, led by so many dedicated conservationist and wildlife enthusiasts!

We at DMG are starting the new year with some wonderful speakers to keep us going until the new season starts then I hope to see many of you joining us on some of the exciting trips, courses and surveys we have planned for our members this year.

We have a great dedicated team of mammal mad committee members who are keen to share their passions and support others so please don't be shy and get in touch if you have any questions or new ideas. Lastly don't forget to take advantage of the resources we offer such as equipment and our small grant scheme to support any mammal projects you are planning!

Charly Mead - Chair - DMG

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DMG NEWS

DMG welcomes new chair and committee members

DMG is delighted to welcome Charly Mead (pictured) as its new chairperson. Charly takes the reins from Helen, who has done a wonderful job steering the group towards success.

As well as welcoming Charly as the new chair, DMG also welcomes three new committee members: James Burrell, Simone Bullion and Beth Markey.



Maritime maverick Rupert Kirkwood captivates audience with tales

Rupert Kirkwood has led a storied life and career, and we were overjoyed to have him share it with our members on 25th October, during his talk 'Up the Creek and All - Watching Wildlife from My Kayak.'

His talk on his adventures at sea were captivating for all in attendance. From porpoise to sharks, Rupert has seen just about every mammal it is possible to see from the seat of one's kayak. He has paddled all 1156 miles of the southwest coast and clocked up more than 31,000 paddling miles over the last 20 years, most of it in Devon and Cornwall. Thank you for your mesmerizing talk Rupert!



Photo: Rupert Kirkwood



DMG NEWS



DMG Harvest Mouse Project - half way there

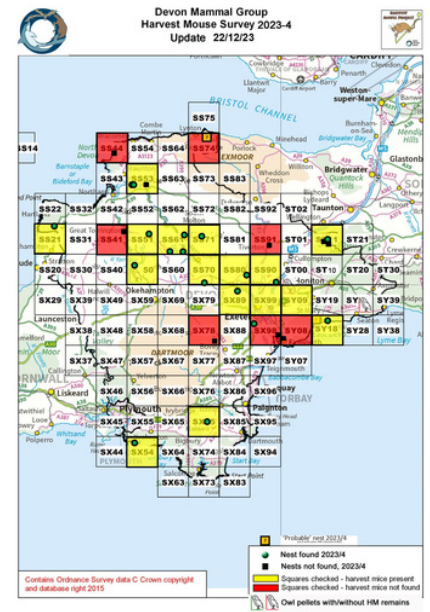
With the closing of December we are already (scarily!) approaching the half way mark of this season's Harvest Mouse project, we are incredibly grateful to the Devon Environment Foundation for their funding of the project this year. It has made things so much easier knowing that funding has been secured before the season even started. We have got off to an interesting start, with the number of nests seeming to be lower than usual in most places...Whether this is due to the dry/hot spell in the summer, or some other reason is yet to be seen, but the trend so far is in line with what other people are finding across the country last time statistics were swapped with other recorders.

We have had some super surveys recently, with the highest total of nests being found at Elbury Farm near Cranbrook just before Christmas. Nineteen nests were found and we had an amazing time: this proves that the nests are out there waiting to be found, especially in damper areas! This was a particularly exciting result as when we first surveyed the farm five years ago we found three nests, the following year, when the farm was taken back in hand by the National Trust there were five nests, and this year a whopping nineteen, this despite the local barn owls being unusually successful! Our previous record for the year was set at Wembury just a fortnight before with nine nests.

Surveys so far this season have included Mutters Moor as part of the Sidmouth science festival, we had a training session with Saving Devon's Treescapes at Meeth, a survey at Lower Halsdon Farm, with more at Wembury, Countisbury, and Brownsham with the National Trust and North Devon Coast National Landscape team, Rosemoor and Elbury. Our barn owl pellet dissection session comes up at the end of January.



Elbury survey



Most recent map

DMG NEWS



DMG Harvest Mouse Project - continued...

Upcoming surveys include:

Sunday 14th January: Holbeton survey.

Monday 15th January: Woodah Farm survey with Saving Devon's Treescapes (see Devon Wildlife Trust's events listings on their website to book)

Saturday January 20th, 1.30pm: Coombe Mill nature reserve. Booking is essential for parking (rearranged after flooding caused us to postpone the last one)

Friday 26th January 2024: Predator & Prey session for landowners with DWT's Avon Valley Project.

Saturday January 27th: owl pellets workshop session, led by Dave Groves of CMG at Woodah Doddiscombsleigh near Exeter. You are welcome to come along even if you attended our last sessions, but booking is essential via email.

Friday 2nd February: Northam Burrows survey, 1.30-3.30pm

Saturday 3rd February: 10.30am West Hawkerland (Aylesbeare) meet at Joneys Cross.

The last three group surveys that we have done have had a 100% success rate, so please, if you get the chance to have a look in some tussocks (or other long grass/phragmites etc near you) do have a look. It doesn't have to be for an hour, everything helps. If you don't happen to find anything, please still send in a record as our map is still looking a little bit thin on the ground despite these recent successes. Thank you!

Contact details:

Contact harvestmouse@devonmammalgroup.org.

Facebook and Twitter/X: search for HarvestMiceDVN.

The sign up form to stay in touch with newsletter is here: <https://devonmammalgroup.us19.list-manage.com/subscribe?u=ffd2c0e8631e2a108893078fa&id=70cb3deb36>

To submit a survey record form (nil result forms are still really valuable)
<https://uk.surveymonkey.com/r/23R5GDK>



DMG NEWS

DWT projects: pine martens....

The Two Moors Pine Marten Project aims to explore how, where and when pine martens could be reintroduced in the South West of England. The project is now in its feasibility stage and is addressing concerns around game shoots and assessed prey and habitat feasibility.

Dartmoor has been identified as a release site, with plans for Exmoor next year, with the caveat that any progress relies heavily on funding. DWT and its partners aim to release a minimum of 30 to 40 pine martens over the next two years. This will ensure a sustainable and healthy population.

Photo: Charlie Marshall



And wildcats...

Devon Wildlife Trust wildcat project is similar in its ambitions to the pine marten project. It aims to restore wildcats to Devon once again. Like the pine marten project, the wildcat project is currently in the feasibility phase, albeit at a slightly less advanced stage. A preliminary feasibility study on wildcat reintroduction across England and Wales, carried out by Vincent Wildlife Trust, highlighted the south west as an area that warranted further exploration for reintroduction.

The DMG wildcat project is now at the beginning of their journey, using scientific investigations, as well as a social feasibility study, to evidence their findings. Devon Wildlife Trust wildcat officer, Cath Jeffs, delivered the first online talk on the project in November, exploring the feasibility of restoring wildcats back to the south west. Watch this [here](#).

Photo cdn.cbuc.com from DWT webpage



Water voles make a triumphant return to the Gara

Water voles have been reintroduced to the River Gara and its tributaries for the first time in fifty years, thanks to the the River Gara Water Vole Reintroduction Project. The project aims is to successfully reintroduce water voles to the River Gara and its tributaries.

Water voles once lived all along the River Gara until they were sadly wiped out - a victim of habitat loss, predation by feral American mink and pollution. In September 2023, a team led by Derek Gow, headed out along the Gara and released 200 water voles, in the hope that they will successfully colonise and develop their population. In the spring, the project aims to release a further 200 water voles along the Gara and its tributaries.



Credit: Peter Trimming

The benefits of water voles

Water voles are a keystone species that have a disproportionately positive effect on their environment relative to their numbers. They are critical to a thriving wetland ecosystem, through natural behaviours such as burrowing, which not only changes the soil condition, making the area more hospitable to other species, but also creates habitats for reptiles, amphibians and other creatures. Furthermore, water voles are herbivorous and make space for more diverse plant life to grow, simply by keeping vegetation under control.

Sources: The Habitat Group / People's Trust for Endangered Species

DMG LETTERS

Big cats: a perspective

By George Bemment



I have been prompted to write in response to the short piece in the September 2023 newsletter entitled “Other wild cats at large?” The sources for the article are cited as being from a newspaper, a wildlife magazine and a website, which unfortunately when you are looking for “incontrovertible evidence”, are not necessarily the best sources. The press love Big Cat stories but mostly in the same way that they love Loch Ness monster stories: they fire our imagination and excitement without any real need to be substantiated. But I think the Devon Mammal Group can do a bit better than that.

There are some proper, well-referenced publications that we can refer to if we want to give a balanced and sensible response to so-called big cat sightings. They may not be hugely up-to-date but they are based upon fact and evidence, and they put things into perspective. For example, check out Chapter 13, Escapes and Introductions, from Mammals of the British Isles, Handbook 4th (Eds. Harris, J, & Yalden, D.W., 2008, The Mammal Society).

Non-native cats (big and small) categorically have turned up in the wild in the past. Between 1970 and May 2006, thirteen species were recorded out of captivity, either as individuals or in small numbers. All were either known to have escaped from zoos or could be reliably attributed to be escapees or releases from private owners. In 1976 the Dangerous Wild Animals Act made it illegal to keep a range of species as pets or in captivity without appropriate licensing, and many odd things turned up afterwards including several of the smaller cats.



DMG LETTERS

Continued...

Chapter 13 of the Handbook is written by S.J.Baker and D.Hills. Simon Baker was the author of a number of papers on escaped exotics and, in particular, the paper entitled “The evidence for the presence of large exotic cats in the Bodmin area and their possible impact on Livestock”, a formal study and report commissioned by the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (1995). Remember the ‘Beast of Bodmin’? The paper concluded there was no evidence for a beast of Bodmin.

The police are required to take reports of dangerous wild animals seriously because of potential risk of harm to life. When I was first in Devon I was asked by the police and media to comment on several ‘sightings’. We never found anything except other explanations. On one occasion a police helicopter picked up particularly good infrared views of the back of a badger while it was foraging. From the ground I was able to point to the sett entrance where it had been lost from view.

Sightings reported to the police – hundreds and hundreds of them - are logged and they cover vast swathes of Britain. Interestingly however, the greater the local media coverage of a big cat story, the greater the cluster of sightings which seem to follow (Baker, per communication). The dots on the map would suggest that we have a nationwide population of big cats, predominantly big black cats such as melanistic leopard and puma. This is a rare form in captivity but it is a common colour for our pet cats. And if any of you have ever taught field courses, you will know that most of us are very poor at judging distance perspective and size. We clearly do not have a breeding population of big cats across the country - where are all the dead bodies on the roads? We kill everything else on the road, why not big cats? – and we hardly ever get any zoo escapees any more, but many, many people still believe big cats are out there, largely because of the wishy-washy, unfounded stories that persist within the press.

I did once see a very good documentary about big cats in Britain. The film makers brought an expert wildlife tracker over from the United States, someone who was experienced with the field signs of the cougars and lynx they hunt there. They took him to various countryside locations where someone had sworn they had seen a big cat. He never found any evidence. The last footage was of him ambling away down along a path looking at muddy tracks, quietly saying “Dog..... dog..... different dog.....dog.....”





UK NEWS

Invasive greater white-toothed shrew found in Sunderland

A new species of non-native mammal for the UK has been discovered in Sunderland. The greater white-toothed shrew has earned itself the nickname 'the Sunderland Shrew'. In 2021 an unusual photo of a dead shrew posted by Melissa Young on social media caught ecologist Ian Bond's eye. Ian reached out to Melissa, pointing out that it looked rather like a White-toothed shrew. A subsequent DNA test confirmed Ian's suspicions. In Britain, the greater white-toothed shrew is only found on the Channel Islands of Guernsey and Alderney, although it is found on the other side of the Channel as far north as the Netherlands.

Source: Mammal Society, Photo: Wikimedia

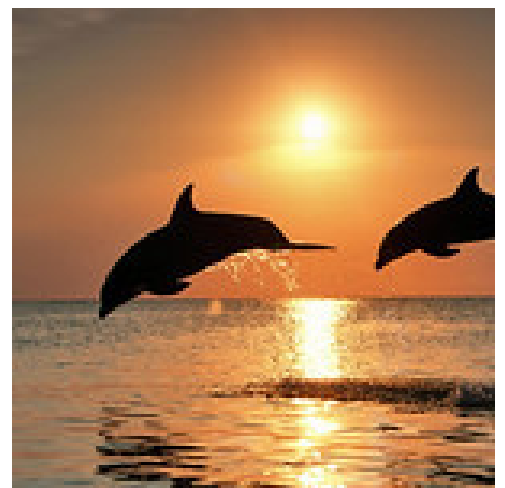


Bottlenose dolphins under threat

New research has unveiled a critical situation for England's only resident bottlenose dolphin population. Led by Cornwall Wildlife Trust and the University of Plymouth, a decade-long study reveals that the pod, now estimated at just 48 individuals, faces severe threats from human activity, pollution, and challenges in rearing young.

This population is less than half the size of most coastal bottlenose dolphin groups and ten times smaller than a pod in the Channel coast of France. Inhabiting one of the busiest shipping lanes globally and waters prone to pollution and fishing pressure, these dolphins are sadly in immediate danger. The researchers are urgently calling for protective measures to ensure the survival of this unique population.

Source: Plymouth University, S. Corr et al. Using citizen science data to assess the vulnerability of bottlenose dolphins to human impacts along England's South Coast, <https://zslpublications.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/acv.12921>, Photo: Angell Williams





FURTHER AFIELD & OFF THE BEATEN TRACK

Humans responsible for decline of giant mammals 50,000 years ago says study

A new study has attributed the loss of giant mammals to human activity, rather than climate change – as was commonly debated. The study, conducted by Aarhus University in Denmark. The study investigated the DNA of 139 living species of large mammals to determine ancestral trends in animal abundance. Their findings indicate a decline in these animals' populations over the last 50,000 years, correlating with human expansion rather than climate change.

Source: *Phys.org*, Photo: *World History Encyclopedia*



Fossil fuels responsible for heart arrhythmia in mammals

Fossil fuels responsible for heart arrhythmia in mammals
A study has revealed that phenanthrene, a byproduct of burning fossil fuels, induces heart arrhythmias in mice, providing the first evidence of its toxicity to non-human mammals.

But now the team has discovered the change in heart rhythm occurs in healthy mouse hearts when directly exposed to phenanthrene, mimicking what happens when we breathe in pollution. Phenanthrene is a polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbon (PAH) that is present in crude oil and emitted into the air when fossil fuels are burnt. Scientists hope that the study will take the UK one step closer to routinely measuring the amount of PAHs or more specifically, phenanthrene, in the air.

Source: *Manchester University*, Photo: *Gerry Machen*





FURTHER AFIELD & OFF THE BEATEN TRACK

Five new species of soft-furred hedgehogs discovered

Scientists have unveiled five previously unknown soft-furred hedgehog species in Southeast Asia. The study involved revisiting museum collections, revealing two entirely new species and upgrading three previously labelled as subtypes to distinct species. Despite their unassuming appearance, the hedgehogs, belonging to the *Hylomys* group, exhibit crucial genetic and physical differences. These findings underscore the urgent need for conservation efforts in Southeast Asia, especially as the region faces escalating deforestation rates.

Source: BBC news, Photo: Hylomys Maxi, EurekAlert!



Bushfire threatens Europe's rarest dormouse

Following a devastating bushfire in Bulgaria, the People's Trust for Endangered Species is assessing the impact on the endangered Roach's mouse-tailed dormouse, Europe's rarest dormouse species.

Post-fire assessments revealed surviving young mouse-tailed dormice, edible dormice, tortoises, and a hedgehog, which provides some hope for the dormice. The monitoring suggests adult dormice could have survived in hibernation during the blaze. Looking ahead, discussions have revolved around strategies to minimise future fire risks, such as implementing firebreaks or adjusting the timing of land-clearing activities to cooler months. However, the complexity of ownership, involving over thirty small landowners, poses challenges in securing agreements and permissions for such measures.

Source: PTES, Photo: PTES





UPCOMING DMG EVENTS

The Common Shrew: Not Tame but Curious - 10 Jan 2024

By Diana Dechmann, Location: online

Shrews exhibit the Dehnel's Phenomenon - a massive seasonal shrinking and regrowth of all major tissues and organs including the skull and brain. Diana Dechmann has spent the past decade studying this phenomenon and will share her findings.

Book your slot: <https://www.eventbrite.co.uk/e/the-common-shrew-not-tame-but-curious-tickets-774863326067?aff=oddtcreator>



Photo: Hanna Knutsson

Black Ops and Beaver Bombing - 15 Feb 2024

By Fiona Mathews and Tim Kendall, Location: the Kenn Centre

Tim Kendall and Fiona Mathews take us on a safari unlike any other. Armed with binoculars, a Thermos and an inexhaustible supply of puns, they travel from Scotland to the Isles of Scilly answering questions like, do pine marten droppings really smell like Parma Violets?

Book your slot:
<https://www.tickettailor.com/events/devonmammalgroup/1104821>



Photo: front cover - Black Ops & Beaver Bombing

UK Squirrel Accord - 19 March 2024

By Kay Haw, Location: Wildwood Devon wildlife park, nr. Feniton

UK Squirrel Accord is a nationwide partnership of 41 leading conservation and forestry organisations, Government agencies and companies working with voluntary red squirrel groups.

Book your slot:
[tickettailor.com/events/devonmammalgroup/1104843](https://www.tickettailor.com/events/devonmammalgroup/1104843)



Photo: Wildwood Devon