



# Devon Mammal Group

## October 2020 Newsletter

[www.devonmammalgroup.org](http://www.devonmammalgroup.org)

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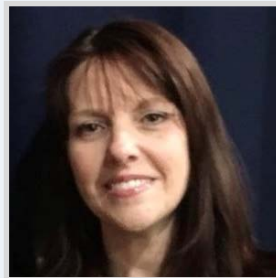
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## Chairs Chat Sept 2020

Firstly, the committee and I hope that you are all safe and well, as we head into another season of uncertainty caused by Covid-19.

I would like to thank the committee for their tireless ingenuity and dedication over the past few months. They have worked hard to ensure that we can continue to

provide our members with as many of the services we usually offer as possible. Thanks to them Devon Mammal Group is now well on the way to having a new website up and running, and have a series of free online talks starting this month (27<sup>th</sup> October at 19:30 hours) the details of which are below.

As several of our usual fundraising activities cannot be run at the moment, we have taken the decision to sign up to Amazon Smile. If any of our members shop with Amazon, we would appreciate it if you could sign in using the Amazon Smile log in, so that a small donation will be made to fund our Harvest Mouse Project over the coming year. *For details see page 9.*

Finally, my thanks go to all of you, our fantastic members, for your continued support. We look forward to 'seeing' some of you at our online talks in the next few months.

Best wishes

*Helen Calver*

## Coming Soon

**Barbastelle Bats in the Bovey Valley**

**27th October at 7:45pm—a FREE online Zoom talk**



Following Stephen Powles' highly successful Zoom talk in August, we invite you to join us on line, to learn about this exciting research project.

Five years ago, researchers from the University of Bristol began a radio tracking project to study a Barbastelle bat colony in the Bovey Valley on the east of Dartmoor. The Woodland Trust commissioned the work together with Natural England, and the researchers set out to firstly find the roost trees and then to track the bats to their foraging sites. The

aim of this research was to provide the woodland managers with information that could improve the habitat management for the species, which is an oak wood specialist. The project was also set up to engage with a team of local volunteers who took an active role in tracking bats through the hours of the day and night.



**For further information visit:**

[www.devonmammalgroup.org](http://www.devonmammalgroup.org)

**our recently updated website.**



# Harvest Mouse News

It's the time of year when most Harvest Mice have finished breeding and we can begin another winter of valuable research into this vulnerable species using nest searches, camera traps and other observations. Our Project Officer will be setting up more opportunities for our trained volunteers to assist in this important research.

## Wild harvest mouse sighting

In September I visited a South West Water site, the Tamar Lakes, which straddle the Cornwall / Devon border. I was fortunate enough to see a live Harvest Mouse running between the reeds, where a ride had been cut down to the reservoir edge as access for anglers, just that morning. A flash of gold and unbelievable joy! I'm told by my companions, that my face was a picture. South West Lakes Trust are going to set up some monitoring here and are well able to do so, following training provided by our Project Officer, Sarah Butcher, in February.

There are plans by the Mammal Society to carry out a national harvest mouse survey in 2021. Thanks to Sarah again for attending a small steering group meeting to discuss this, along with 3 other Local Group representatives. Prof Fiona Mathews has submitted an application to the Green Recovery Fund project to support this and thanks to Sarah and Ian Egerton, from Devon Biodiversity Records Centre, for writing letters of support endorsing this plan.

We've all heard that wildlife can be beneficial for our mental health, but never, during lockdown, have people experienced this more. It is an opportune time to encourage the public to look out for the Harvest Mouse. While it is extraordinarily rare to see one in the wild (I'm still buzzing), it is possible for a trained eye to identify their nests, which is also exciting, and of course provides much needed records to help protect the Harvest Mouse.

*Kate Hills*



Dave Smallshire

## Habitat destruction concerns

Although the DMG Harvest Mouse Project, which has now covered almost every 10km square in the county, has shown Harvest Mice to be widespread, they are still only existing in small isolated patches of suitable habitat. Changes in management through cutting and grazing regimes can render these habitats unsuitable in just one such event. Raising awareness of these problems is a major part of the project.

I was recently contacted by Sian Avon (Senior Ranger, Teignbridge District Council) who is overseeing the creation of a new, and very exciting, country park on the outskirts of Exeter. Ridgetop Park will be a new, large, public park. It is proposed as 'suitable alternative natural green space' (SANGS) and is being delivered to mitigate the impact that the collective additional population from new development may otherwise have on the Exe Estuary.

Sian, who has attended one of our Harvest Mouse training courses, was concerned that the necessary clearance of some habitat on the edge of the site might affect Harvest Mice. During a very quick search she found a number of nests and so asked for our advice on how best to manage the site. A quick training session for a few of her volunteers and a further search turned up several more nests including Dormouse nests. Sian has now planned to take out as little of the habitat as possible in order to clear the nearby stream, which will be invaluable to both species during the dry summer periods, and to retain and manage this as a designated Harvest Mouse area.



Ridgetop Park Harvest Mouse habitat

*Sue Smallshire*



The following article by Charlie Elder, journalist, wildlife enthusiast and author of books on British nature, was featured in the Guardian newspaper recently:

## Country diary: tufts of grass hide tiny breeding chambers

Hawkerland, East Devon: We search the tussocks for the intricately woven nests that let us gauge Harvest Mice numbers

**Charlie Elder**

[@charlieelderTH](#)



Fri 25 Sep 2020 05.30 BS

‘You’re unlikely to spot harvest mice in the wild – they’re really tiny, and too wary and quick.’

Photograph: Georgia Raybould/Alamy

I’ll never look at a tussock of grass in the same way again. Hidden within this one was a ball of woven fronds that once cradled life like a beating heart at the centre of the dense cluster of stems.

We had spent more than an hour searching clumps of vegetation beside heathland in east Devon. The light was fading and the two of us, backs bent and several metres apart, moved from tussock to tussock, parting strands to carefully examine the inner

recesses. Finally, my expert guide, Sarah Butcher, called me over. Concealed at knee height amid ranks of vertical stalks was a spherical mass, like a tangle of yarn caught in a loom.

This hollow ball of dried blades of grass, small enough to be cupped between two hands, was what we had come to find – a harvest mouse nest. “Lovely to know they’re here,” said Sarah. “Though you’re unlikely to spot harvest mice in the wild – they’re really tiny, and too wary and quick.”

The distribution of these thumb-length, gingery-brown mammals is most easily assessed by surveying nests, and Sarah organises the Devon Mammal Group’s Harvest Mouse project, which runs from October to March. At this time of year, when foliage dies back, the intricately woven constructions suspended above the ground are more visible.

Equipped with a prehensile tail to aid climbing, Harvest Mice (*Micromys minutus*) live among crops, in reed beds, beside ditches and along field margins in the southern half of Britain. Females build several nests from late spring until autumn, in which they raise separate litters of offspring. Each breeding chamber is used only once and dries out by the time the young leave, after just over a fortnight. Nests that are still green are potentially in use and should be left well alone.

We searched on without finding another. Sarah would have expected to see more here, she told me, but their populations fluctuate and most don’t live much longer than a year. “They’re declining and incredibly susceptible to weather extremes and cold winters.”

The single harvest mouse nest, the first I had ever come across, offered a glimpse into the secretive world where our smallest rodent dwells amid a towering forest of grass stems.

**‘The single harvest mouse nest, the first I had ever come across.’**



Photograph: Charlie Elder

# Cornwall Coastal Otter Project

The Cornwall Coastal Otter Project began almost two years ago. It has been very successful, with many spraint samples collected by the group of volunteer surveyors.

The team suffered a great loss in January when Rebecca Jayne Smith, one of the leaders in this project, sadly passed away. They recognise the incredible work Rebecca did and have continued this project in her memory.

In March, Dave Groves completed a poster showing the preliminary results of the CCOP. Seasonality and distance above high tide were both seen to affect diet choices of otters around the Cornish coast. Dave has continued to work hard throughout lockdown to produce a full spraint reference manual showing the common prey species found and how to identify them from their remains. You will find the poster and Dave's amazing manual by visiting:

<https://www.cornwallmammalgroup.org/ccop-manual>



# Devon Harvest Mouse Project

## We're back!

We're delighted to announce that the Harvest Mouse Project is just about to get started again, in this, its fifth year. Over the last few seasons we have made some exciting discoveries, carried out hundreds of surveys and many training sessions all over the county. We have also got some pretty impressive camera footage of Harvest mice in the wild, thanks to our trail cam project.

This year, with the Covid cloud hanging over us things will look a little different, but we're still going to be surveying, and still very much need your help! We're going to be running far fewer training-sessions, and these will be outside with up to six people. We'll try to run some bookable small group survey sessions around the county, and the trail-cam project will continue too.

We're also hoping to add a new dimension to the project this year and try to look at owl pellets to find evidence of Harvest Mice. Training and possible workshops will be offered for anyone who would like to have a go, but this might be something we can post out to people to do at home if they would prefer to get involved in this way.

We have trained over 300 people across the county and this year, bearing in mind the lack of training sessions, we really need to get as many people out looking for nests as possible. If everyone just looked for nests in one place and filled in the report form, that would represent a massive number of records.

None of us know quite what is round the corner, but should there eventually be the need for further restrictions, maybe we can turn and potential lockdown to our advantage by using our exercise time to get out into our localities for a quick ten minute search in any likely habitat, thereby generating a wealth of information.

In the meantime, thank you as ever for your support and time.

The nest-finding season is now officially open, so the best of luck!

Sarah

Harvest Mouse Project Officer.



# Long lost mammal news



Photo: Steven Heritage

## Elephant (shrew) never forgotten

The Somali Sengi has been rediscovered in the wild after 50 years – but not in Somalia. Among the 19 species of Macroscelidea – that is, elephant shrews, or sengi – the Somali Sengi was among ‘The Top 25 Most Wanted’ in Global Wildlife Conservation’s 2017 Search for Lost Species. Known from about 39 museum specimens, and believed to be endemic to a remote arid area of northern Somalia and Somaliland originating around 5.4 million years ago, presence was last recorded in 1968.

As a group, long-nosed, kangaroo-legged sengis are familiar from TV documentaries as swiftly running and bounding insectivores, ranging from mouse to squirrel size, and able to travel at nearly 30 km/h, though

taxonomically are in their own family, more closely related to elephants, armadillos and manatees than shrews. All sengis studied so far are socially monogamous and pair for life, keeping to distinct home ranges. However almost everything scientifically known about the Somali Sengi derives from museum notes and specimens, or inferences based on ecology of other sengi species.

A research team led by Steven Harding from Duke University USA surmised that the Somali Sengi might exist elsewhere in the Horn of Africa outside its historical range. 1,259 traps, baited with peanut butter, oatmeal and yeast, were set up at 12 localities in four administrative regions in the Republic of Djibouti (Arta, Dikhil, Tadjourah, and Ali Sabieh), near the borders with Ethiopia and Somalia.

Whereas previous Djibouti survey expeditions in the 1970s yielded no findings, this latest met with success at the opening of the very first trap. The final tally was 12 Somali Sengis, including first ever photos and live video for scientific documentation.

DNA and morphological analysis to confirm species identification threw up further information and questions. The Somali Sengi’s tail tuft helps distinguish it from the similar Rufous Sengi *Elephantulus rufescens*, which is also found in Somalia, Ethiopia, plus South Sudan, Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania. As with other sengis, coat colour can differ between populations according to the ground substrate, for example the Somali Sengis recorded at the Assamo location had redder pelage hairs. More fundamentally, DNA and anatomical analysis found that the Somali Sengi is closer to sengi species from Morocco and South Africa, leading to a redesignation of genus, from *Elephantulus* to *Galegeeska revollii*. A further change would be a move from ‘Data Deficient’ to ‘Least Concern’ in IUCN classification.

Although the Somali Sengi is now formally resurrected for the Western scientific community, research ecologists at Association Djibouti Nature believe that the species was not truly lost: during interviews with local Djiboutians, Somali Sengis were recognised in photographs.

Galen Rathbun, co-researcher for the project and co-author on the paper, died a few months after the Djibouti expedition. A world renowned sengi researcher, he was longstanding chair of the IUCN Afrotheria Specialist Group and involved in the discovery of two new sengi species in 2008 and 2016. A follow up project is planned for 2022 to study Somali Sengi ecology and behaviour with GPS radio-tagging, in the meantime with a planned survey programme taking in neighbouring countries.

Other mammal species on The Most Wanted List include De Winton's golden mole *Cryptochloris wintoni*, a relative of the sengi endemic to South Africa, and the Ilin Island cloudrunner (siyang) *Crateromys paulus* in the Philippines.

Sources (20 August 2020)

S. Heritage *et al.* 2020. New records of a lost species and a geographic range expansion for sengis in the Horn of Africa. *PeerJ* 8: e9652 <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7441985/> ; <https://peerj.com/articles/9652.pdf>

<https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/32879790/>

<http://www.sci-news.com/biology/somali-sengi-08764.html>

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/science-environment-53820395>

<https://www.discoverwildlife.com/news/a-sengi-species-lost-for-half-a-century-has-been-rediscovered-in-a-surprising-location/>

## Grin and bear it?



## Bear beginnings

Globally important near-intact Pleistocene remains of a Cave Bear *Ursus spelaeus* have been discovered by reindeer herders on the Lyakhovsky Islands, in the New Siberian Islands archipelago between the Laptev and East Siberian Seas in northern Russia. Remains of a cub were also found on the mainland. The significance is similar to that of virtually intact Ice Age mammoth finds, such as the Malolyakhovsky mammoth.

Previously only known from fossil skulls and bones, this unique Cave Bear specimen, which from initial analysis is between 22,000 – 39,500 years old, retains soft tissues, internal organs, even its nose. Meat is literally put on the bones for studies of this prehistoric species or subspecies, which lived across Eurasia in the Middle and Late Pleistocene period, becoming extinct about 24,000 - 15,000 years ago during the Last Glacial Maximum, superseded by the Brown bear.

*Ursus spelaeus* was of comparable size, 1.5m at the shoulder and 2.7m at full length, but at 300 - 500kg twice the body weight of Brown bears *Ursus arctos* found in Europe today. The common name 'cave bear' relates more to where fossil remains have been unearthed than the habitat of the animals, which are thought to have been mostly vegetarian, retreating to caves to hibernate. Specimens from Devon caves, such as can be seen in Exeter RAM Museum and Kents Cavern in Torbay include those of a precursor, the Ancestral Cave Bear *Ursus deningeri* from around 400,000 ago.

Further detailed molecular, genetic, cellular, microbiological and other research is planned by the North-Eastern Federal University (NEFU) in Yakutsk's Institute of Applied Ecology of the North. The field site is a long distance from Yakutsk, which itself is more than 5,000 miles from Moscow.

The Lyakhovsky Island bear is the latest in a number of remarkably preserved finds in recent years, including mammoths, woolly rhinos, and Cave Lion, which, while notable scientific discoveries, have a more worrying side, having been exposed and recovered from permafrost that is thawing due to climate warming.

Sources (14 September 2020)



Cub found on the mainland

North-Eastern Federal University in Yakutsk Statement:  
[https://www.s-vfu.ru/en/news/detail.php?ELEMENT\\_ID=143325](https://www.s-vfu.ru/en/news/detail.php?ELEMENT_ID=143325)

CNN:  
<https://edition.cnn.com/2020/09/14/europe/preserved-cave-bear-scn-scli-intl/index.html>

Kents Cavern website:  
<https://www.kents-cavern.co.uk/cave-animals>

Siberian Times :  
<https://siberiantimes.com/other/others/news/first-ever-preserved-grown-up-cave-bear-even-its-nose-is-intact-unearthed-on-the-arctic-island/>

Photos from the archive of NEFU RIAEN

Stephen Carroll



# Seal disturbance causes great concern!

The Cornwall Seal Group (CSG) have put out the following press release to raise awareness of the appalling disturbance our seals have been subjected to this summer.

## **\*\*\*Press Release\*\*\* Extremely high levels of seal disturbance across the Southwest this summer**

September 2020

**Give wildlife space**

**Disturbance is damaging**

**Stop and think!**

As we near the end of a very busy summer season here in the southwest, it has been great to see the local tourism sector rebuild during the uncertain times of COVID-19. However, as people have taken advantage of the fantastic activities during their 'staycations', our marine wildlife has suffered from extremely high levels of disturbance. Cornwall Seal Group Research Trust (CSGRT) have recorded some of worst seal disturbance incidents they have ever seen during this season, resulting in our globally rare grey seals experiencing constant interruption of vital rest by leisure, recreational and tourism-based human activity.

Here at CSGRT we love activities such as paddle boarding, snorkelling and kayaking, but whilst doing them, we all need to **give wildlife space**. These activities, along with commercial tripper and private recreational boats have cumulatively impacted highly sensitive seal sites.

Recent research by CSGRT has shown that seals are disturbed as often as every 14 minutes in Cornwall. Now, the annual pupping season has begun, preventing disturbance throughout the autumn and winter is vital to make sure these vulnerable young seals survive. It is crucial that mothers are able to feed their pups until they have enough fat reserves to sustain them over the coming months. The impacts of disturbance on mums and pups are not immediately obvious, but it can lead to underweight pups which likely die before their first birthday. Katie Bellman, Research Ranger from CSGRT says *'We aim to raise awareness of why disturbance is one of the main threats to seals here in the southwest, in order to try and prevent it. It is easy to solve...we just need to **'give seals space.'***

**It is normal for seals to rest on land, so you need to leave them there. Disturbance is bad for a seal as it:**

- Interrupts their **rest**
- Causes **stress**
- Wastes **energy**
- Can result in **injury** or **death** a few months down the line.





Director of CSGRT, Sue Sayer confirmed 'Seals are key to keeping our marine ecosystems healthy and in balance. They are an important part of our local heritage and an attraction on which communities and businesses rely. We need to protect these amazing animals to sustain local recreation and tourism sectors and for future generations to enjoy.'

**Here are our the top tips for messaging about how to watch seals well (Nationally agreed by the Seal Alliance)**

**Avoid approaching seals and avoid any activities near seals.**

#### Levels of seal disturbance

1. You have disturbed a seal if it is **looking at you**
2. Back off to avoid it **moving away**
3. Seals injure themselves if you scare them **into the sea**

Stay out of sight - **seals in the sea close to shore** may want to haul out

You are **not** encouraged to seek out encounters with seals in the sea. **If you have a chance encounter keep moving.** If they **make a big splash 'crash dive'** it shows they are distressed.

#### Seen a seal pup?

- **Give mums and pups space:** Disturbance is damaging: Please stop and think! • **Please keep away** and always avoid being **smelt/seen or heard** by a pup and its mum
- **Watch** onshore/offshore for pup/mum for 30 minutes
- **Ring BDMLR 01825 765546** if you are concerned.

#### Contacts:

**Katie Bellman** (Research Ranger, CSGRT) [katie@cornwallsealgroup.co.uk](mailto:katie@cornwallsealgroup.co.uk) **Sue Sayer** (Director and Founder, CSGRT) – [sue@cornwallsealgroup.co.uk](mailto:sue@cornwallsealgroup.co.uk) / 07834153202



The photo left shows a dog biting a young seal slow to get back in the sea.

Below, a newborn pup alone on the rocks.



Below: A line of canoes and swimmers preventing any escape for a male and pregnant female who have just woken up.



**Please note all CSGRT photos are taken by volunteers from great distances using superzoom cameras.**

Sue Sayer





## Lightning

I've spent the last ten years monitoring Dormice in the woods around the north of Dartmoor and it's something that maintains and endless fascination. Each animal seems to have a different character or behaves in a certain way and those that I've met a few times even seem to recognise me (at least, I think they do!). It's always interesting when you find one with a distinguishing feature; it can be anything from an injured foot or a fight scar, to a damaged or missing tail. Quite often they have a little white tip on their tail which can help to tell them apart from the others.

I was in Fingle Woods doing something entirely different and I walked past a few nest tubes, so I gave one a gentle tap. I just happened to have a plastic bag in my pocket so slipped it over the opening to the tube (a tried and tested method). Sure enough, a dormouse shot out and into the bag. As part of the Fingle conservation team, it's often useful for me to know who is about, but I wasn't doing a survey, so I let it go. As I did, I noticed a white flash on its head, so captured a quick video of it before it shot up the tree with the usual speedy expertise. This is one of the most remarkable and individual of characteristics I've seen in ten years and I hope I find it again sometime - but if I don't, I've always got eight full seconds of video to remember it by. I sometimes give these individual characters a name so, what's appropriate here? Stripe? No, faster. Flash? No, something even faster. 'Lightning'!

Watch the video: [https://youtu.be/M\\_uJ9F3qaqw](https://youtu.be/M_uJ9F3qaqw)

*Matt Parkins*

## Have you visited the new DMG website yet?

Our Social Media Secretary, Rebecca Robinson, has done a fantastic job of updating the website and is still working to make it as accessible, up to date and interesting as she can.

We hope to post our newsletters on the website soon, available to members only, but to archive older newsletters, which will be available for anyone to see.

## Records and Photos

We would like to encourage you to send in your sightings and any interesting mammal related news. If you have any photos you are happy to share with us, we would be very grateful.

## Amazon Smile

If you are choosing to buy products from Amazon when shopping online, please consider signing up to Amazon Smile, and choosing DMG as your charity to support. Amazon will give us a donation of 0.5% of the net price for any eligible item bought via Amazon Smile. You will need to shop via the Amazon Smile website <https://smile.amazon.co.uk> not the main Amazon website.

N.B. If you think that Amazon should pay it's fair share of tax, there is a 38 degrees petition at

<https://speakout.38degrees.org.uk/campaigns/amazon-tax-aug>

## DMG Talks 2020

Wednesday 11th November: Urban Mammals by Dawn Scott, Head of the School of Life Sciences, Keele University—  
a FREE online Zoom talk

Tuesday 1st December: Thinking Through Badgers - Researching the controversy over bovine tuberculosis and the culling of badgers by Stephan Price, Author —a FREE online Zoom talk

All these talks are FREE, but from January there will be a small charge.

We are using EVENBRITE to take bookings and payments for talks.