



Devon Mammal Group

July 2022 Newsletter

www.devonmammalgroup.org

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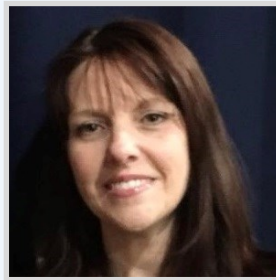
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Chairs Chat

Thank you to those of you who attended the AGM in July, both online and in person. We were treated to a very interesting talk on Otter surveying, by our fantastic Treasurer, Ellie Knot. Ellie stepped in at the 11th hour when our planned speaker, Stephen Powles came down with Covid-19. We are delighted

that Stephen has recovered and will be hosting his talk "Cave Elephants of Mount Elgon" for us in the Autumn.

The Committee has been busy organising the 2022 to 2023 talks, so keep an eye out for emails and Facebook updates. We plan to offer talks face-to face and online simultaneously, as this provides access for all our members.

We would also like to thank all of you who have chosen to make donations to DMG via Amazon Smile. Every penny helps to keep our amazing Harvest Mouse Project running, so if you shop with Amazon and would like to help DMG, do follow the link on our website homepage and please sign up.

The committee and I wish you all a wonderful summer, and a reminder that a bowl of water in the garden can really help wildlife to survive the heat.

Best wishes

Helen

(Chair - DMG)

Latest news! New legal protections for Beavers

It was a dramatic week for the Beaver. On July 19th we were expecting the government to announce legal protection from persecution for England's wild beaver populations. But instead, we heard the unwelcome news that Defra was delaying this decision. Alongside other Wildlife Trusts nationally, DWT took to social media to apply some pressure on the government to stop the delay and ensure beavers are protected.

On 22nd July the government did in fact announce that Beavers would become a protected species. The change in legal status will make it an offence, from October, to deliberately capture, kill, disturb, or injure beavers, or damage their breeding sites or resting places – without holding the appropriate licence.

Defra has announced new legislation that will provide legal protections for beavers in England and could pave the way for the animals to be released into the wild under licence.

The Wildlife Trusts welcome the protections for "nature's engineers", calling for sensible management guidance and incentives for landowners to make space for beavers on their land.

Beavers are a 'keystone species' and have a highly positive impact on their environment. The industrious herbivores are native to mainland Britain but were hunted to extinction in the 16th century by people who wanted their fur, meat, and scent glands. The end of beavers led to the loss of the mosaic of lakes, meres, mires, tarns, and boggy places that they were instrumental in creating.

Meldon Wildlife Festival

Tuesday, 23 August 2022 at 10:30 - 16:00



Location: Meldon Old Quarry

Join the National Park and partners for a wild day out celebrating Dartmoor's unique and beautiful wildlife. A free, fun-filled event for all the family!

<https://www.dartmoor.gov.uk/enjoy-dartmoor/events/events-list/npa-events/meldon-wildlife-festival>



Red Squirrels and Pine Martens

A talk by Dr. Craig Shuttleworth
from Bangor University.



Tuesday 6th September, at 7.30pm

online talk only (via Zoom)

Further details to follow

The Cave Elephants of Mount Elgon

A talk by Stephen Powles.

Wednesday 28th September, at 7.30 pm

The Kenn Centre, Kenn or by Zoom (details to follow)



Mt Elgon, an extinct volcano straddling the Kenya/Uganda border, is home to a unique population of elephants. Consuming a montane vegetation made low in minerals by the leaching effect of heavy rainfall, elephants travel up to 150m in to the mountain to “mine” the mineral rich volcanic rock. The talk will also explore the wider natural and cultural history of the mountain and the fascinating theories as to how the caves might have been formed.



New plans to reintroduce Pine Martens to South West England

Plans for the possible reintroduction of pine martens to the South West of England were announced on July 22nd by a partnership of conservation and land management organisations. The project has started initial discussions with a wide range of stakeholders including Devon Mammal Group. These discussions are planned to continue for the next 18 months and aim to ensure a reintroduction is sustainable, working for people, wildlife and pine martens.

What is a pine marten?

Pine Martens are members of the weasel (mustelid) family. They are around the size of a cat and are expert tree climbers. This makes them ideally suited to living in woodlands. They are mainly nocturnal and most of the time they live alone in sparse populations – so you're unlikely to see one. Much of the Pine Marten's diet is made up of voles, but they will also eat other small animals including mice, Grey Squirrels, birds and insects. In autumn they also consume a lot of wild fruits.



Why should pine martens be brought back?

Although they were once common, Pine Martens became extinct across large parts of Britain (including the South West) 150 years ago. The species is Critically Endangered in England and Wales. Their absence has left our local ecosystems without a critical component. As predators of small animals, Pine Martens play an important role in rebalancing nature, especially in our treasured woodland habitats. The return of Pine Martens would be a positive step in restoring the fortunes of local wildlife at a time when it faces huge challenges. A release here in the South West would follow other successful reintroductions of Pine Martens in Wales and the Forest of Dean.

Where and when could the first Pine Martens be released?

Following initial feasibility studies, two areas have been identified as having suitable habitat for Pine Marten release sites. These are the wooded landscapes of northern Exmoor and eastern Dartmoor. DWT will be working closely with people in these areas to enable a successful release and healthy population. The project aims to release the first animals in autumn 2024.

Who is involved in the Two Moors Pine Marten Project?

The Two Moors Pine Marten Project is a partnership of conservation organisations which includes Dartmoor National Park Authority, Devon Wildlife Trust, Exmoor National Park Authority, National Trust and Woodland Trust. The project has put together a webpage which contains Frequently Asked Questions and a timeline of what will happen and when. Go to www.devonwildlifetrust.org/bringing-back-pine-martens.

The Two Moors Project will also be setting up further meetings and workshops with Devon Mammal Group and other stakeholder groups over the coming months, to enable specific conversations around how a reintroduction may impact stakeholders, working together to resolve these. Further information will be shared once available. (See presentation on page 4.)



Two Moors Pine Marten Project presentation:

The project is holding a public on-line presentation

Thursday 15 September - 6pm

This is a chance to learn more and to ask questions.

It's free to attend, **but you need to register** - go to:

www.devonwildlifetrust.org/events



What's been going on?

Sarah Butcher has, yet again, been very busy this season. After her Winterwatch appearance, she did a radio interview and a talk to the Bovey Tracey Devon Wildlife Trust group. She carried out 7 group surveys, 10 training days and combined training sessions with the Cornwall Mammal Group and all this on top of her own research. We are very lucky to have found such a talented and dedicated Project Officer!

So, what happens next? Well, yet again we have to find money to fund Sarah's salary, if the project is to carry on next season. Grants for citizen science and community projects are, although not easy to find, still out there. Grants for salaries are much more difficult to find. The project has come such a long way and the data Sarah has collected, with the help of all her volunteers, has made it possible to begin to assess why Harvest Mice appear to be vulnerable.

The population size estimate in The Mammal Society's *Review of the Conservation and Population Status of British Mammals* (2018) was very uncertain because of lack of data. Changes in agricultural practices, such as the introduction of winter cereals harvested before the end of the Harvest Mouse breeding season, and the use of less favourable shorter-stemmed crops, are likely to cause a reduction in population size. Populations naturally show great variation in size, and therefore several years of survey are required to demonstrate that a factor has a negative effect on this species.

The repeated surveys that DMG has been carrying out often find areas where Harvest Mice were previously found but seem to have disappeared. Why? The Project needs to continue if we are to draw any useful conclusions, e.g. change of land use/management, loss of habitat, climate change etc.

continued on page 4



Sarah sits on a The Mammal Society Steering Group for the species, through which Devon Mammal Group has become one of the leading lights in pioneering Harvest Mouse surveys.



Sarah's work in Devon is having a direct impact, such as through the implementation of GPS virtual fencing and conservation grazing at Aylesbeare and Trinity Hill, which will reduce the pressure on areas with remaining nests (long term data show a decline in nest areas following changes in grazing).

RHS Rosemoor are leaving longer grass and explaining to visitors why they are doing this, as well as planning to plant up areas specifically to see if they can expand their existing population of Harvest Mice. These are just two examples of the many positive responses to Sarah's work.

As you will have seen in our previous newsletters, Sarah has designed and built feeding stations, complete with camera traps, which have been helping to estimating the population of a small area. They have also given her constant amusement, due to the many large mammals and birds caught on camera trying to enter the stations.



Courtesy of NHBS, she has been able to trial new cameras, prior to purchasing some more. The money for equipment has also been used to buy new Longworth traps, which have been adjusted to be super sensitive. Camera footage has shown that Harvest Mice are able to access the traps, have a good meal and leave, without setting them off.

What next? Owl pellet surveys will hopefully show up new areas inhabited by Harvest Mice and the Barn Owl Trust are keen to help. The owl pellet surveys will start in earnest, and the new Longworth traps will come into use, with excluders so that only Harvest Mice can enter. Sarah would love to shed light on how far Harvest Mice move. All we need now is funding ...

Visit our new website www.devonharvestmouseproject.Edublogs.org

Latest Squirrel news - a joint project!



Work is underway for a Grey Squirrel clearance project in Exmoor National Park, where the aim is to reduce Grey Squirrel numbers from a 35 linear mile stretch between Exmoor and the sea, to improve woodland health and native biodiversity. Round 1 of the Forestry Commission Funding came to a close in March, following a successful 6 months of bringing early ideas into action.

Exmoor National Park is very excited to report success with Round 2 of the Forestry Commission 'Woods into Management Fund'. This has secured significant funding for the next three years of the project, starting in June 2022 and ending in March 2025 - allowing the time and resources to really get the project off the ground and developing into the future. The Management Programme is due to re-start in the very near future. Exmoor National Park also plans to build a volunteer base to support the key personnel.

Grey Squirrel Management Course

A one-day, LANTRA certified, Grey Squirrel management course has seen a very successful start over the beginning of 2022. British Red Squirrel, a working project of Red Squirrel South-West based in Cumbria, have worked tirelessly to pool resources and expertise from all over the UK to create this standardised course, after noticing the lack of streamlined national training. This training has already taken place in different venues across the country and has received really positive feedback so far.



Two courses were held in the South West in February and were found to be a very beneficial resource for training interested supporters and future instructors, in order to support the Grey Squirrel management project with Exmoor National Park. The training not only provides certification and LANTRA accreditation, but also acts as a valuable networking opportunity.

More courses will be held as soon as the demand arises, and dedicated instructors are being sought in different parts of the country.

If you would be interested in attending a course, and/or training to teach the course in your area, please get in touch at rswproject@gmail.com – you will be added to the waiting list for your local area, and alerted as soon as a suitable course is arranged.



Red Squirrel South-West

redsquirrelsouthwest.org.uk

britishredsquirrel.org

charity no. 1138484

Through the generous grant from the 'Woods into Management Fund', RSSW are developing ongoing plans for the re-introduction of Red Squirrels, in collaboration with Exmoor National Park.

Grey squirrels are not just a threat to reds, they also raid bird nests, taking eggs and nestlings. Research has suggested that the greys have played a major role in an 85% decline of Spotted Flycatchers in the last 50 years and 57% decline of Wood Warblers in the last 23 years.

Greys cause considerable damage to broadleaf woods by bark stripping; this action kills or deforms the tree and leads to the destruction of woodland and a loss of timber value. The European Squirrel Initiative has shown that greys cost the forestry industry in excess of £40 million per year through tree damage.

Latest figures show a hectare of undamaged 150-year-old oak is currently estimated to value at around £54,370/ha, compared with a hectare of grey squirrel damaged 150-year-old oak valued at £7140/ha where squirrels have not been controlled – a difference of £47,230!

Greys are especially concerning to The National Forest due to their specific targeting of Oak – the tree that makes up a large proportion of our woodlands. They will also target Beech, Field Maple, Hornbeam, Silver Birch, Sweet Chestnut, Sycamore and willow, amongst others!

Watch out for updates on this exciting project!

<https://redsquirrelsouthwest.org.uk/red-squirrel-conservation/>



The Red Squirrel Acoustic Monitoring Project

Mammal Society • Huawei Technologies •
University of Bristol • Rainforest Connection



The Mammal Society is partnering with the University of Bristol, non-profit tech start-up Rainforest Connection, and Huawei Technologies for a ground-breaking project aiming to protect red squirrels through collecting bio-acoustic data.

Custom-built Guardian and AudioMoth devices, powered by Huawei's world-leading AI technologies, will be used to collect acoustic data from the environment in forests inhabited by only red squirrels, by only grey squirrels, and by both species. The data will be transferred to researchers at the University of Bristol, who will use it to build up a picture of the ecosystem to help learn about the behaviours of squirrels.

The project will give us a new insight into squirrel activity, which would not be possible without using this technology. The results of this project will help us identify where conservation effort will be most effective and make the biggest difference to red squirrel populations.

<https://www.mammal.org.uk/>



Peak District Mountain Hares under threat!

England's last surviving population of mountain hares may be under threat due to global warming, a conservation group has said.

Only 3,500 mountain hares are left in England, research suggests.

The latest research says the country's last surviving population of the hares in the Peak District uplands is at risk of extinction.

The independent study, conducted by Manchester

Metropolitan University and Queen's University Belfast, is the first such assessment for 20 years. Dr Carlos Bedson, lead author of the study, said the findings were "deeply concerning". He hopes the study's findings, due to be published later in the year, will help guide successful reintroductions of the "shy, but striking" species, as well as safeguarding those that are left.

Surveys saw researchers walk more than 515 miles (830km), observing nearly 2,000 mountain hares. They estimated the population density was just 10 mountain hares per sq km in the Dark Peak - the area where the populations are largely based.

The research, which started in 2017, was funded by the People's Trust for Endangered Species (PTES). The trust said it believes climate change is an increasing risk to the creatures' survival, making summers too warm and reducing food sources, such as heather. Reduced snow coverings mean the hares may not be as camouflaged in winter, despite their white coats. Dr Bedson said: "Mountain hares love the cold and climate change is a major threat to them.

Mountain hares died out in England during the last ice age, though they survived in Scotland. However, in the 1870s, some landowners reintroduced them in England and they began to thrive in the Peak District.

Mountain Hare pelage is brown in summer and turns white in winter. Once it was thought the hares ate snow to turn white. In fact, the change relates to differences in day length and air temperature, which stops them producing brown melanin in their fur.

Nida Al-Fulaij, conservation research manager at PTES, said: "Mountain hares, like most British mammals, face numerous threats which can be compounded by one another or balance each other out. Unpicking what's happening at a local level can be really challenging. It's clear that our snowy white Mountain Hares are mismatched against the dark moors when we have no snowfall".

By Jennifer Harby
BBC News

Source: *Carlos Bedson*



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National Dormouse Footprint Tunnel Survey

Hazel dormice are a rare and declining species in Britain. Until now, there has been no systematic survey of hazel dormice in Britain. The National Dormouse Footprint Tunnel Survey is based on using footprint tunnels to detect to presence of dormice in hedgerows. The condition of the hedgerow will be assessed using the Great British Hedgerow Survey.

A new method using footprint tunnels has recently been developed where associated probability scores to detect dormice using varying levels of survey effort have been calculated. These probability scores are habitat dependent. It is both easier to identify a hedgerow, rather than some other habitats, and easier to detect dormice using them. The National Dormouse Footprint Tunnel Survey will be based on a search for dormice in hedgerows rather than any other habitat. Footprint tunnels are relatively easy to use and can be used by people who do not have a dormouse licence as the likelihood of encountering the animals in a tunnel is rare.

The Great British Hedgerow survey is the standard hedge survey in Britain and will give information on hedge condition and provide management advice. A dormouse survey undertaken in conjunction with a hedge survey will give an indication of dormouse occupancy of hedge type or dormouse absence from hedge type.

<https://ptes.org/get-involved/surveys/countryside/survey-hazel-dormice/national-dormouse-footprint-tunnel-survey/>

Margaret Bristow - she will be missed!

Loyal member Margaret Bristow passed away earlier this year. She was an amazing amateur naturalist and continued attending DMG courses and talks well into her 90s. She had an inquiring mind, always asking questions and building on her already impressive knowledge of our fauna and flora.

A founder member of DMG, Margaret was active in many local groups and a joy to be with, full of fun but passionate about wildlife and often fighting the corner for many of our species. Her particular passion was Otters, and she regularly drove up to Mull to study them.

Her Budleigh Salterton garden was wonderfully wild, and she took great pleasure in showing people around it. She was remarkably fit and active, with regular visits to the gym, well into her 80s.

Her last visit to a DMG talk was just before the pandemic, and she was as sharp as ever.

What a wonderful character she was.

Sue Smallshire

