

Wiltshire Mammal Group



Newsletter - Spring 2024

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Welcome

2023 was a year packed with surveys, training events and talks. The year began with a dormouse survey techniques workshop. Wiltshire Mammal Group worked with the Nurturing Nature project to train a group on the effective use of footprint tunnels.

Collaboration with other wildlife groups was a feature of the year whether it was offering training on owl pellet dissection or a joint public engagement project as part of the National Hedgehog Monitoring project we are now taking part in.

There are also a number of articles in this newsletter from friends and partner organisations demonstrating the breadth of mammal work being undertaken in the county as well as the extent of the cooperation taking place.

It was also a year of "hellos and goodbyes". We are very sad to say goodbye to Robyn who has been our Events and Surveys officer in recent years. But Robyn kindly carried out a lengthy hand-over to her replacement Ashley White who you will be hearing a lot more from.



Hedgehog. Credit Steve Deeley

Plus we now have our first (of we hope many) mammal champions. Abi Gazzard is our new Hedgehog Champion guiding all hedgehog related work as we go forward in 2024.

Meet the two new members of the team!

In 2023, WMG welcomed two new members to the committee. Ashley White is our new Events and Surveys Officer, taking over from Robyn who has done an amazing job over the past few years but is sadly moving away from Wiltshire. Ashley has worked in wildlife conservation and engagement roles since 2008 and is currently a project manager at the Wildfowl and Wetlands Trust. She is a long-term licenced dormouse monitor and really enjoys assisting with box checks – you never do know what will turn up in a box! The group has also adopted a new role of ‘Hedgehog Champion’, filled by Abi Gazzard. Abi has a background in hedgehog research in the UK but is now working on a variety of small mammal species around the world in her role with the IUCN Small Mammal Specialist Group. Hear more from Abi and Ashley below.

What will your role entail?

Abi: Anything and everything hedgehog. This past year, I have had a great time hosting a ‘hog research talk for WMG members, supporting hedgehog surveys in Codford and also running a footprint tunnel survey near Devizes. Watch this space for more ‘hoggy developments!

THE COMMITTEE

For further information regarding the group, membership and recording please email:

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Wiltshire Mammal Group Committee

Come and join us!



Ashley: My role is to help organise and run events for members including training and talks, and to support mammal surveys in Wiltshire.

What have you enjoyed most so far since joining the WMG?

Abi: It's been wonderful being able to try out lots of new things as a WMG member, from owl pellet analysis to dormouse survey training. One of my favourite events was a muddy, wet harvest mouse survey near Stonehenge during which we found more than 40 harvest mouse nests – it was amazing!

Ashley: A particular highlight was ambling around Codford village from dusk into the night tracking down hedgehogs, assisting with the monitoring project. Overall I've enjoyed getting to know the committee, which consists of a very dedicated group of volunteers, and meeting some of the members at the AGM last autumn.

Which WMG activity are you looking forward to most in 2024?

Abi: With the Group Secretary, Miranda, we will be setting up some camera trap surveys in North Wiltshire to contribute to the exciting new National Hedgehog Monitoring Programme.

Ashley: We are currently planning a programme of events and training with a focus on riparian mammals for the coming year. I'm particularly looking forward to supporting the field events this spring and summer.

Could you be a Mammal Champion?

Following Abi Gazzard's appointment as our Hedgehog Champion, we would like to open up new Mammal Champion roles for other mammals. We are looking for people who are passionate about particular mammals and would like to help shape the direction of mammal surveying and research for these animals.

We are looking in particular for people who would like to champion dormice, water voles, weasels, stoats, polecats and shrews. So if you feel strongly about any of these animals contact us and let's see how we can work together.

Please email wiltshiremammalgroup@hotmail.co.uk to register your interest.



Robyn Owen

We can't move on from talk about the committee though without extending a HUGE thanks to Robyn Owen. Robyn is our outgoing Events and Surveys Officer and without her unstinting hard work so much of the events and survey work would not have taken place over the past couple of years. But Robyn has now moved away from Wiltshire so we want to wish her all the success and happiness for the future. THANK YOU ROBYN!

Owl Pellet Workshop and Analysis

Miranda Shirnia

Owl Pellet Workshop and Analysis Training

In October 2022, the Mammal Society confirmed that the Greater white-toothed shrew had been discovered in Britain. Unfortunately, this animal is known to be an invasive species in Ireland so the Mammal Society was asking for support to identify whether they were more widespread than the singular example found in Sunderland. This prompted Wiltshire Mammal Group to organise a survey for Wiltshire to help with the Mammal Society's efforts.

The simplest way to ascertain if there were any Greater white-toothed shrews in Wiltshire was to analyse the contents of owl pellets. This project was going to be valuable in itself but there was an added bonus of large numbers of records to be generated on other small mammals that might otherwise be difficult to survey. The project offered another opportunity as well, the Wiltshire Mammal Group Committee had agreed it would be a good idea to find ways to work more closely

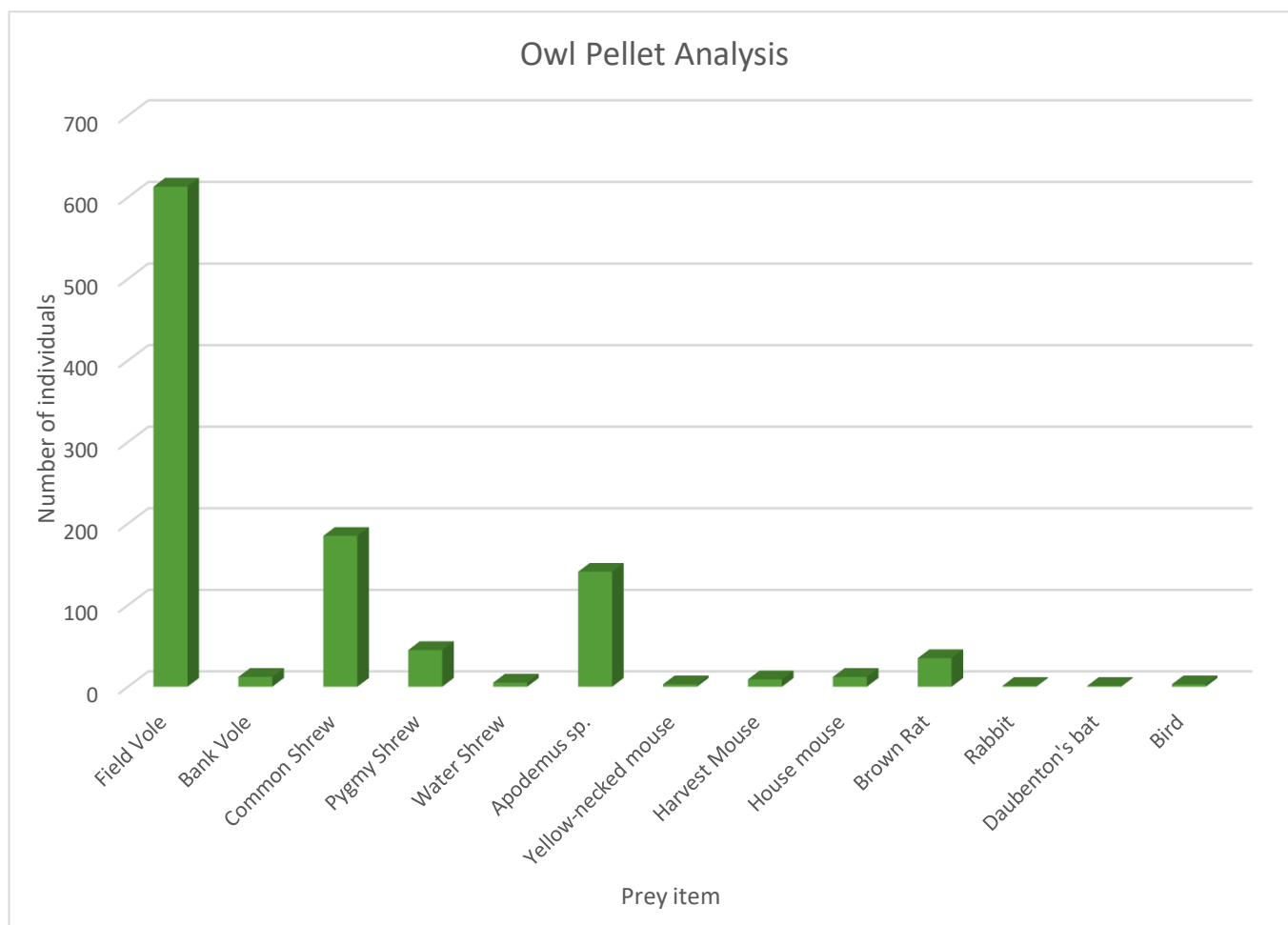
and often with other Wiltshire-based wildlife organisations so three local Natural History Societies became involved too. If the project was to be successful, the result would be for a group of people across the county to be well trained enough to feel confident to carry out this survey work independently in the future.

Ric Morris was our osteological expert for the two days of training. Ric

(the Skull Bloke) has a particular fascination for the contents of owl pellets, which he has been keenly dissecting since the 70s making him the ideal person to explain the theory behind owl pellet dissection and to supervise the practical side of the training.



Ric Morris



Two events took place: one in the north of the county and the other in the south. This was done to ensure as many people as possible could take part. The locations were close to where our partners Salisbury, Tisbury and Malmesbury Natural History Societies are based meaning those groups could encourage their members to come along as well.



Dissection in Action. Credit Miranda Shirnia

The idea of dissecting owl pellets proved very popular, so with more than 40 people signed up, we got to work armed with countless pellets, tweezers, gloves, trays, cocktail sticks, report sheets, hand sanitizer, reference books and a variety of other aids.

Over the course of the weekend, 40 batches of pellets were analysed from 40 locations across the county, each batch containing 5-20 pellets. Many attendees at these events took home additional samples to analyse in order to continue practising and honing their skills.

At this moment in time, some recording forms are still arriving, so the following numbers are the current running total, and these numbers will grow.

Prey item	No.	%
Field vole	613	57.6
Bank vole	12	1.1
Common shrew	185	17.4
Pygmy shrew	45	4.2
Water shrew	5	0.5
Apodemus sp.	141	13.2
Yellow-necked mouse	3	0.3
Harvest mouse	9	0.8
House mouse	12	1.1
Brown rat	35	3.3
Rabbit	1	0.1
Daubenton's bat	1	0.1
Bird	3	0.3
	1065	100.0

Thus far, a total of 1065 prey items have been identified – clearly, we consider this to be an absolute minimum, as it wasn't always possible to produce a precise (or even an approximate) minimum number of individuals in each batch of pellets.



Harvest mouse skull. Credit Miranda Shirnia

As would be expected when dissecting owl pellets, over half of the prey items identified were Field vole, and with a smaller proportion of Common shrew and Apodemus mice. (Incidentally, such high proportions of Field vole indicate it has likely been a "good" vole year, and this proportion will be reflected in each batch).

The interesting species for us, for which these records make a great contribution to our knowledge and to future updates to the mammal atlas, were Pygmy shrew, Water shrew, Yellow-necked mouse and Harvest mouse. To get such good numbers of these certainly keeps the analysers on their toes!

Perhaps the most unexpected record was of Daubenton's bat, from Barn owl pellets at Manor Farm, Codford – bats in owl pellets is not unexpected, especially when Barn owl may hunt inside barns which are in use by roosting bats. Bat skulls are clearly tiny and delicate and often are too damaged to enable an accurate ID. However, with the help of Ric Morris and several keys and text, Gareth Harris is confident that the bat skull found was a Daubenton's bat.



Daubenton's bat skull and bones. Credit Miranda Shirnia

Coincidentally, Gareth Harris undertook acoustic bat surveys at Manor Farm, Codford in 2023, and recorded a good activity level of Daubenton's bats along the river there.

For those interested in predation of bats by owls, there's a great (open access) [paper here](#).

One of the key aims of these owl pellet workshops was to search for [Greater white-toothed shrew](#)..... there were a couple of suspect-looking skulls and mandibles.....all of which were confirmed as very worn Common shrew.....i.e. the red-tipped teeth were so worn that any red-ness had been lost. In such cases, Ric

demonstrated how the dentition of GWT shrew is very different to Common shrew anyway.

Good news for our Pygmy shrews then - we found no Greater white-toothed shrew.

Feedback from the training on the day and over the following weeks was hugely positive with a lot of interest in organising a follow-up event in March for those wanting to further practise and develop their skills. The date for this has now been set for March 9th from 9.30am to 12.30pm. Email to register: wiltshiremammalgroup@hotmail.co.uk

We couldn't end this article without a BIG THANK YOU to everyone who helped to make it happen. Without all those owl pellets there would have been nothing to dissect so thank you to the many farmers, landowners and barn owl nest monitors who collected pellets for us, particularly the Lewis Raptor Group in South Wiltshire, and Robert Hayden and his team of the SPTA conservation group (east) nest box team, members of the following farmer groups: Chalke Valley, Wilton Estate, Salisbury Plain, Pewsey Downs and Wylve Valley... and last but by no means least, our partners at [Malmesbury and District Natural History Society](#), [Salisbury and District Natural History Society](#) and [Tisbury Natural History Society](#).

County Recorder's Report

Gareth Harris

Guidance relating to Sars-CoV 2019

Mammal study in Wiltshire continued to regain some degree of normality after the difficulties of the Covid19 pandemic. Restrictions to reduce infections in humans have eased as have those to reduce transmission from humans to mammals.

It is worth reiterating however, that most of the guidance for mammalogists and bat workers remains in place to manage and minimise risks of native mammals catching Covid19 from people. Groups should now be used to routinely wearing the necessary PPE (gloves and masks) at all times when handling mammals or entering roosts/nests/homes etc and managing the risks.

Eurasian beaver

2023 saw a dramatic increase in beaver activity, or more precisely, in people noticing and recording it!

At present, the majority of established beaver activity is on the Bristol Avon catchment, with sites around Bath and on the river Frome being well known for beaver now. The [Natural England survey](#) highlighted evidence elsewhere in the catchment for example, the Semington Brook near Trowbridge, but the situation is currently changing quite quickly.

November saw the discovery of evidence of beaver foraging on the river Nadder, thankfully delighting the landowner. Also, during the autumn, evidence of beavers, including sightings and feeding signs, was noted on the river Wylde for the first time, with landowners here suggesting there'd been evidence for some months already.

Giles Wagstaff, Natural England, provides a summary of our current knowledge of beavers in the county, elsewhere in the newsletter.

But a plea from me and the Mammal Group – please please look out for evidence of beavers on your local rivers and please submit those records. They are remarkably widespread now and there is little to be gained by withholding records, but everything to be gained by sharing knowledge and enabling us to work with farmer and landowners. There have been a number of instances recently where recorders have decided to keep “their” beavers secret and not share records, for fear of the beavers being disturbed or persecuted. In my experience, the landowners that I work with are largely interested and supportive of beavers (some have asked me if they can have some too!), but some are concerned and wanting information on how they manage problems and issues arising from beavers (e.g. the felling of orchard trees on river sides). We have more to gain by working with farmers and landowners.

Going forwards, there will need to be greater planning and partnership working as the county welcomes, and adapts once more, to returning beavers. We stand to gain much from their wetland engineering but it's

imperative that nature conservation bodies work together to support landowners and problem-solve together where and when required.

Hazel dormouse

Hazel dormouse monitoring continued at almost all sites and was compliant with Covid-related guidance. As in previous years, over 20 sites are regularly monitored for dormice across Wiltshire; some of these are coordinated by mammal group members, others are coordinated by local groups specific to their sites (such as Wildlife Trust reserves, National Trust sites and so on). At time of writing, data is still being compiled, and submitted to PTES by each dormouse project, so I'm unable to comment upon numbers or trends. However, some projects speak of good results in 2023.



Hazel dormouse. Credit Miranda Shirnia

WMG worked with the Nurturing Nature Project in 2023, who kindly provided funding for the purchase of additional dormouse footprint tunnels for use in their project area within Cranborne Chase National Landscape (previously, the AONB). As detailed elsewhere in this newsletter, these were used to supplement existing WMG kit, where surveys resulted in positive survey results. Thanks to all involved in this.

Harvest mouse

WMG continued with its ongoing programme of harvest mouse nest surveys in 2023, originally launched back in 2016, and now contributing to the Mammal Society's recently launched national project.

Ashley has provided a great summary of this year's survey activity elsewhere in the newsletter, and this is also a great opportunity to thank other organisations for supporting this project by conducting their own surveys, for example, Anna Forbes and her brilliant volunteers ([Action for the River Kennet](#)).

Hedgehogs

2022-2023 saw a surge in interest and activity relating to hedgehog survey and conservation. Reflecting this, the Group was delighted to receive the support of Dr Abi Gazzard as our *Hedgehog Champion*. Furthermore, a number of Groups in the county have signed up to support and deliver PTES' new hedgehog survey (more on this elsewhere in the newsletter!).

The Codford Hedgehog Project delivered a second year of survey, and as we write, the application to Natural England to renew the licence for a third (and final) year is pending. This project has enabled us to catch and apply individually numbered spine tags to a small number of hedgehogs, to monitor their movements, supported by a network of villagers with hedgehog feeding stations and a few camera traps, supplemented by weekly walked transects.

More broadly, there has been a general increase in recording of hedgehogs across the county following awareness-raising by national and local groups, including Malmsbury and District Natural History Society. 2024 looks set to be a mega busy year for Hedgehog survey and conservation!

Water vole survey

WMG is increasingly concerned about the health of water vole populations in the county and has raised these concerns with relevant organisations in the county. Catchment-scale water vole surveys were undertaken widely in the county in the 2000s-2010s by

organisations such as the Wiltshire Wildlife Trust, but survey activity has declined since then, largely due to a lack of resource to do so. Consequently, water vole records in the county are becoming increasingly old, and out-of-date. Greater survey efforts are required in the county from all parts of the environment sector.

I've raised these concerns previously, and little has changed in the past year (except, those records get ever older!). My thanks again to [Action for the River Kennet](#) who coordinated surveys on their patch again in 2023.

Also on the Kennet, I've been working with some landowners monitoring water vole recovery in response to the mink control that we encouraged in 2022. It's heartening to see water vole returning to this stretch of river, and especially in the context of wider work with ARK. Landscape-scale recovery is always going to be a team effort.

Mustelids

In a year very similar to 2021 in this regard, 2022 saw widespread reports of otters, and only a small number (in relative terms) of polecat, stoat and weasel. The current dearth of rabbits across the county MUST surely be impacting these species.

Curiously, we've received a series of reports of Pine martens, including a report of two animals, over the past year. We're not aware of any sanctioned releases. One record relates to the edge of the New Forest, where pine martens have been known for some time and where monitoring is ongoing. But other records relate to the other side of the county.

Anyone seeing a pine marten is strongly encouraged to submit the record, directly to me if you wish to do so in confidence.

American mink were reported, and trapped, at a number of locations. We strongly encourage submission of sightings of mink and their field signs, and we're keen to hear from keepers and land managers undertaking mink control – mink control has an absolutely essential role in water vole conservation.



Weasel. Credit Steve Deeley

2023 saw an increase in mink trapping activity in the county, an essential part of water vole recovery projects both nationally and locally. Wiltshire Wildlife Trust recommenced activity on the river Wylde, whilst other farmer groups launched projects elsewhere in south Wiltshire. This is against a backdrop of continuing mink control activity elsewhere in north Wiltshire.

Inspired by [reports](#) of the success in east Anglia of the work of the [Waterlife Recovery Trust](#), Wiltshire Mammal Group will shortly be holding an event to share experiences on mink control. Professor Tony Martin has been invited to Wiltshire to present and share their work; a series of mink control projects in Wiltshire will be attending to share their work too. Details of this event will be circulated soon, so please watch the website and Facebook Group for more information.

Rabbit & brown hare

No change in thoughts and comments from last year's report. Rabbit numbers remained low as in previous years across much of the county, numbers had largely crashed again by the autumn. There were localised reports of apparently healthy numbers – but also reports of an increase in poaching of rabbits in such areas.

As rabbit numbers remain low, I wonder what impact this has upon our predators, especially stoat and polecat (but not forgetting red fox and avian predators too) and can only presume times are tough for them too. I would therefore encourage people to keep an eye on their local rabbit populations – conduct regular counts of

adults and juveniles on your regular walks and see if they show signs of recovery.

The hot weather of 2022, and then in 2023, seemed to generate further deaths of hares, with Myxomatosis and other diseases potentially implicated. We encourage the finders of carcasses of hares showing signs of disease to consider submitting the carcass for research.

Details of the research relating to disease in brown hares and details of how to report them, and how to submit their carcasses for research at the University of East Anglia, may be found here: [URGENT: Disease in Brown Hares; your help needed](#). Dr Diana Bell and her team at the University of East Anglia, who is leading the research on hares, reiterated the need to remain vigilant and to continue reporting instances of dead/dying/diseased hares.

Small mammals

Wiltshire Mammal Group has long been keen to promote survey of small mammals – perhaps our most under-recorded species (according to numbers of records, House mouse is rarer than Hazel dormouse!). The Mammal Society's [Searching for Shrews](#) Project provided a good stimulus and we launched a weekend of owl pellet analyses in November, supported by some of the owl & raptor groups in the county who collected and shared hundreds of owl pellets for us!

Miranda provides an excellent summary of this work elsewhere but it's worth a comment upon the outcomes of this work. We're still collating the data (because several attendees have continued to analyse additional batches of pellets – thank you!) but we're now over a thousand prey items identified. Whilst the majority of items relate to Field vole and Common shrew (as would be expected), there are also smaller numbers of Field vole, wood mouse, pygmy shrew, brown rat, and excitingly, yellow-necked mouse, water shrew and harvest mouse – and surprisingly, a Daubenton's bat too. We'll report more on this in the near future.

A major part of this project is feeding back to the owl and raptor projects, and the landowners whose owls provide the pellets. Particular thanks to Nigel Lewis' Raptor Group, and the SPTA conservation group (east) nestbox team, and the Wylde Valley Farmer Group.

Recording & Submitting Records

Recording activity is generally increasing, with more records submitted each year, in particular via online platforms such as [iRecord](#) and the Mammal Society's [Mammal Mapper](#) app. Added to this, a number of recording schemes recently transferred considerable records onto iRecord for its verifiers to address, check and verify – most notably in 2022, this included the British Trust for Ornithology who made available many tens of thousands of non-bird records collected during surveys that its volunteers undertake.

There are a variety of ways to submit records to us – [iRecord](#) and the Mammal Society's [Mammal Mapper app will be our preferred henceforth. We'll continue to keep an eye on Living Record](#) but strongly encourage those still using it to consider using iRecord or Mammal Mapper instead. Focussing on just two apps (iRecord and Mammal Mapper) will greatly help those of us who are verifying records and managing the data.

Several members send in regular updates via our template recording spreadsheet.

Dormouse Training Event

Gareth Harris

In 2022, WMG delivered a training event on hazel dormouse ecology, hosting trainer Georgie Starkie. So on Sunday 12th March 2023, we invited Georgie back for the next instalment, with a session on dormouse ecology & survey techniques.

This was delivered on a sunny March day at Underhill Wood Nature Reserve, East Knoyle, and was delivered in partnership with Anna Cooper at Wiltshire & Swindon Biological Records Centre, who are providing wildlife survey training for their Nurturing Nature volunteers, through the Chase & Chalke Landscape Partnership scheme, a project with Cranborne Chase AONB.



We explored the various survey techniques such as nestboxes, nesting tubes, and footprint tunnels, and offered some hands-on opportunities too.



10 WMG members and 10 Nurturing Nature volunteers enjoyed this training event, some of whom went to deliver surveys in 2023 elsewhere in Cranborne Chase.....more on this elsewhere in the newsletter.....

Huge thank you to Jonathan Thomson for hosting us, and to trainer Georgie Starkie, and the team at Nurturing Nature for supporting this event.

People in the Park 2023

Robyn Owen

Community and connection are deeply entwined with nature conservation, and an integral part of Wiltshire Mammal Group's purpose. We were therefore thrilled to be a part of People In The Park Salisbury last summer. The event was hosted by Salisbury Transition City whose mission is "to be a catalyst for positive change and create a better Salisbury through Networking, Education, Inspiration and the exploration of zero carbon solutions within our own communities". Transition towns is a non-political grassroots global movement that brings people together to achieve real and positive change for us and the environment. It was a scorcher of a day at Queen Elizabeth Gardens and under the welcome shade of our Marquee everyone busily set up their stalls ready and excited to welcome the flocks of people. The event kicked off, Glastonbury style, with a vibrant welcome speech followed by live bands and acts on the main stage.



"Who did that poo?" We hollered to people gathering around our stall. Ice cream covered sticky fingers pointed at pictures of some of Wiltshire's mammals, while trying to match animals with distinctively shaped deposits. A great game to kick off conversations about mammals in Wiltshire. People shared their tales of mammals they had seen in their garden, loft or local area. A number of people signed up as interested new members and everyone left with a little more knowledge of mammals and why they are so amazing! It was a brilliant day, and we look forward to more events like this in the future.

A huge "Thank you" to Wiltshire Bat Group and some of our brilliant members who helped on the stall throughout the day - most importantly this allowed us to keep the ice cream supply topped up!

Winter Walk

Ashley White



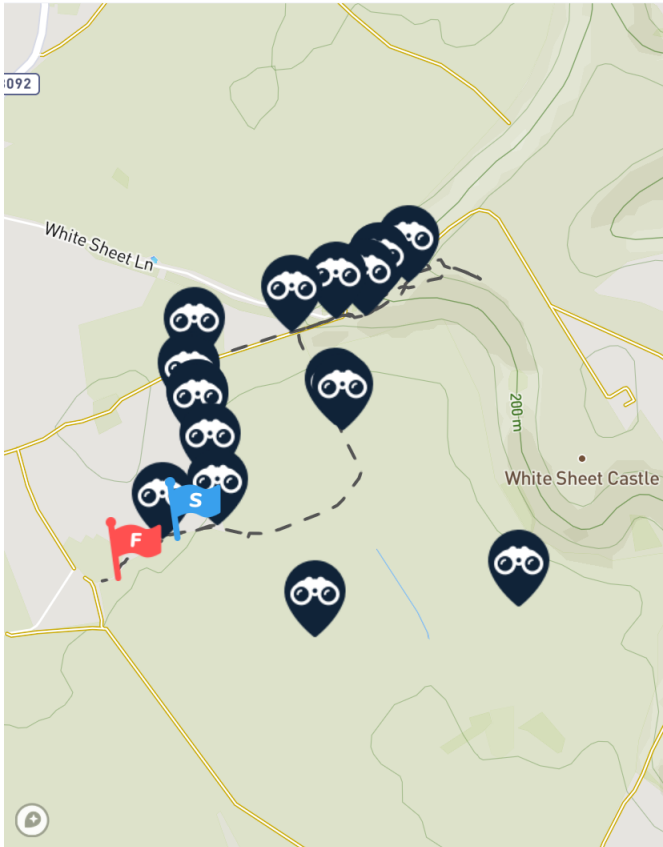
This year our December Winter Walk was held on a brisk and changeable day, at the National Trust's White Sheet Hill, near Stourhead. White Sheet Hill is a chalk downland Site of Special Scientific Interest, set within the Cranbourne Chase National Landscape, which is nevertheless in a relatively under-recorded part of the county for mammals. There are far-reaching views from the slopes and summit of the hill, so it offers a good vantage point for mammal spotting.



Harvest Mouse nest. Credit Peter Thompson

LIST VIEW

MAP VIEW



Sightings:
19

Distance:
3.57km

Duration:
2hr 9m

The walk was led by WMG committee members Pete Thompson and Gareth Harris, who were joined by four new attendees, so plenty of eyes to keep watch for mammal activity and signs. Notable highlights spotted during the walk included several brown hares, harvest mouse nests, a hunting fox, bank vole feeding signs, deer tracks, and signs of badger. All records were submitted via the user-friendly Mammal Mapper app, (see photo above) thereby contributing to national data sets and recording schemes.

In addition to gathering mammal data, these walks also aim to up-skill and inspire confidence for WMG members to submit records when you're out and about, and you never know - some of the most well-visited and unlikely sites may be under-recorded.

Nurturing Nature Project

Anna Cooper – Citizen Science Project Officer



Chase and Chalke Landscape. Credit Anna Cooper

The Nurturing Nature project is citizen-science based and aims to equip local people with skills in wildlife identification and recording, so they can become active biological recorders in the local area. The project is being run by the Wiltshire & Swindon Biological Records Centre, as part of the Cranborne Chase National Landscape's wider Chase and Chalke project.

In 2023, the Nurturing Nature project has run over 75 training events for our volunteers, and this has led us to collect around 4500 new records for the Cranborne Chase area. The project has just received an extension from the Heritage Lottery Fund and will be continuing until September 2024. We have worked closely with the Wiltshire Mammal Group in 2023 and we hope to continue this into 2024, especially in terms of preserving the project's legacy and providing future support for our volunteers, through the involvement of local groups.

Some mammal highlights from 2023, include the dormouse survey training course in March, which was led by Georgie Starkie and hosted by Underhill Wood Nature Reserve. This provided our volunteers with essential skills in surveying techniques, which led to them working with Laura Loncar, deploying dormouse footprint tunnels along the Ox Drove near Knowle Farm. Excitingly, we successfully recorded some dormouse footprints there! Another set of dormouse footprint tunnels were deployed at a farm in Semley, but no prints have been recorded as of yet. We are looking forward to redeploying the tunnels next year with the support of our volunteers and the Mammal Group.



Clay scat for demonstration purposes. Credit Anna Cooper

We have also been working closely with the Mammal Society and Derek Crawley who have provided volunteer access to many of their webinars past and present. Expert tracker and Vice Chair of the Oxfordshire Mammal Group, Bob Cowley has supported us to deliver a mammal tracks and signs event on Martin Down NNR. This event was hugely successful and inspired lots of our volunteers to look more closely at



Skulls from Bob Cowley's Tracks and Signs event. Credit Anna Cooper

tracks left in damp mud and the size and shape of holes at the sides of paths.

A big thank you too, to Peter Thompson, The Beaver Trust, Field Studies Council, PTES and the UK Wild Otter Trust who have provided mammal-related volunteer training for the Nurturing Nature project too.

We are excited to be releasing a series of Mammal Society talks in January on Mondays, which will be available to our volunteers. We have also booked some volunteer spaces on their Basic Mammal Identification Skills online course, which can be booked via our Volunteer Hub. If you are interested, please sign up as a volunteer here: <https://bttr.im/cnmw2>

In other news, the Wiltshire and Swindon Biological Records Centre is now the designated hub for the PTES's National Hedgehog Monitoring Programme Pilot Scheme which will be taking place in multiple locations across Wiltshire in 2024. If you are interested in volunteering, please contact the Mammal Group directly or contact WSBR on brc@wiltshirewildlife.org.

The following two articles came about through funding for materials and training from the Nurturing Nature Project showing that what they have been doing in 2023 has yielded positive results...

Beginners Luck

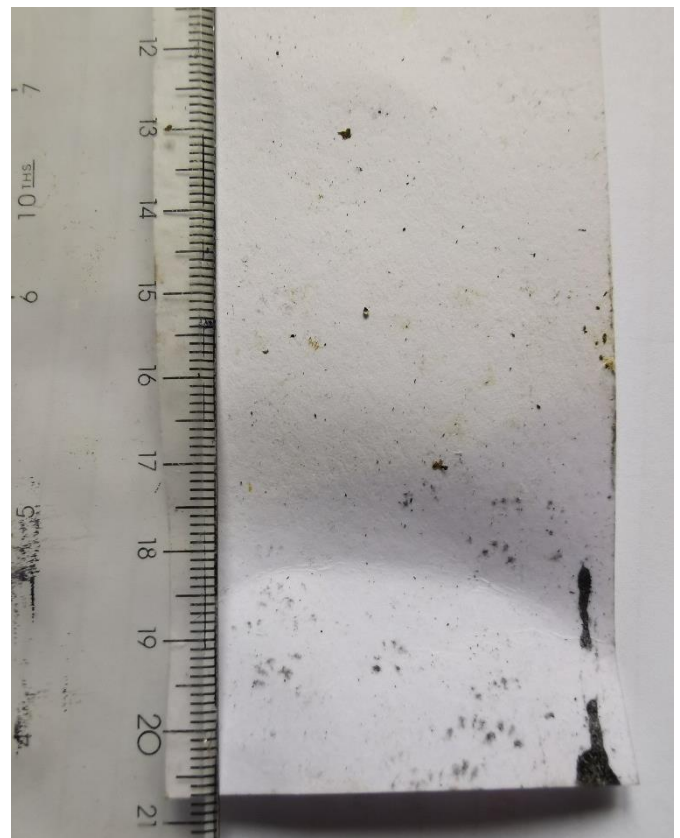
Laura Loncar

When it comes to mammal surveys I am, what Gareth terms, a complete muggle. So, it was with a certain amount of trepidation that I put myself forward to run a Dormouse Footprint Tunnel survey, particularly when I found that doing it in conjunction with the Chalke and Chase Partnership, I would also be leading a team of other volunteers. I had done two workshops with Georgie Starkie, one of which specifically addressed Footprint Tunnel Surveys so armed with the shiny new tunnels and other equipment I took the plunge.

The chosen site was along and near the Ox Drove that runs along the top of the Downs above Cranborne Chase. Half of the tunnels were running along the Ox Drove, half in a bit of old woodland beside it. Deploying these was a bit of a challenge pushing through the undergrowth and fallen trees. Two weeks later in late April I did the first check with a volunteer. Bit of a disappointment, not a footprint to be seen, just the odd slug. I was with Inés López-Dóriga on the second check, and she suggested tightening up the tunnels and we moved a couple closer to the edge of the wood. Still nothing much on the papers. I decided that the tunnels along the Ox Drove were not in a good position as the hedge they were in had just been severely cut back to make space for new fencing. The landowner suggested moving them to a spot called Chickengrove Bottom. So along with a larger team of volunteers on a gorgeous sunny Sunday in late May we put up a dozen tunnels in what felt like ideal habitat, coppiced dense hazel, brambles, honeysuckle, quiet and undisturbed. As we wandered, we were spotting abundant and diverse wildflowers and surrounded by butterflies and bees. Fingers crossed.

It was just me checking next time and instantly the paper in the tunnels was showing evidence of something when taking a look inside. I looked carefully and compared them with the prints on the Mammal Society Guidance. They looked like little wedges. So, I sent off the photos to Gareth – bingo! Dormouse. Extremely satisfying.

Proof of presence established, there was no need to keep the tunnels there so with a couple of other volunteers we moved them to the edge of the wood by the Ox Drove. The tunnels deep inside the wood did not show any prints. It just felt too far from any forage. So, we moved them all to the edge of the wood which in July was beginning to develop nuts and fruits and flowers on hazel, blackthorn and brambles. The checks through August and into September began to yield cards covered in footprints and in some cases, something had been using a tunnel as a feeding station and it was full of empty nutshells. Dormice or no dormice, it was very satisfying and exciting to see. Once again, I had to call on Gareth and Lisa to check out the prints and nibble marks and am happy to report that at least some of the prints belonged to a dormouse.



Dormouse Footprints. Credit Laura Loncar.

It has been an excellent experience and a great way to start my surveying career. I walk past the sites where the tunnels were very often and it has changed the way I see the wood knowing that as well as the visible wildlife that I regularly see, a whole unseen thriving population of mice and voles and at least one dormouse is living there as well.

Managing Hedgerows with Dormice in Mind

Jenny Allan and Harriet James

Church Farm, Semley is a dairy farm which includes two small areas of ancient woodland and connecting



hedgerows. The same hedgerow lines appear on Ordnance Survey maps of the 1880s with the same layout of roads around the village. Today the hedges consist of hawthorn, hazel, holly, blackthorn, elder, crab apple, field maple, ash, bramble, dog rose and honeysuckle.

Between April and September 2023 we surveyed for dormice using 50 footprint tunnels. A new hedge-cutting regime has been introduced on the farm, with

some hedges cut one side only on a two-year rotation, so we were keen to see if dormice were present and to establish a baseline for future surveying. The hedges



are part of the Countryside Stewardship mid-tier scheme. Gaps in the hedgerows have been replanted and some sections have been laid as part of free courses run on the farm.

We used what3words to help us relocate tunnels, collect the footprint papers and replenish the ink roughly every fortnight. After many sweltering or soaking months of multiple footprints, nibbled paper, droppings, urine and camera trap videos proving only the presence of mice, we reached September and finally managed to record just one footprint which Gareth Harris could verify as a dormouse. We were ECSTATIC!



All photographs in this article are credited to Jenny Allan and Harriet James.

Big Cat Conversations

Rick Minter



On 25th April in Devizes Rick Minter gave an update on big cat investigations, witness reports and emerging evidence to support the theory of large cats being present and even naturalising across Britain. It had been ten years since his last talk to Wiltshire Mammal Group so there had been some fascinating developments...

The Big Cat Conversations podcast, produced by Rick and which hears directly from witnesses on big cats in Britain, has galvanised interest and prompted some significant reports and evidence. This includes a shot and mounted black leopard from NE England, and thermal footage in Derbyshire of what appear to be large cats, verified by scaling.

The trend of reports continues to suggest around 75% of reports matching black leopards, 20% matching pumas (mountain lions) and 5% Eurasian lynx. Many reported behaviours and vocalisations also fit these cats. Witnesses come from all walks of life and include farmers, gamekeepers, police, anglers, vets and ecologists. Some encounters are dramatically close up.

At least 20% of the reports involve a dog or a horse with the witness, reacting to the large cat allegedly encountered.

Four DNA results for leopard. *Panthera pardus*, from black hair samples are now in the public domain, and Rick predicts more will follow soon.

Fresh and clinically eaten out carcasses of deer, sheep and foxes continue to be reported and photographed from many parts of Britain, which informants believe to be the result of big cat activity.

In his awareness raising work, Rick tries to gauge attitudes of people to coexisting with these alleged large cats, and in the emerging hard evidence, Rick hopes that DNA sequences will help to indicate any links amongst the cats, such as whether they show some consistent characteristics.

Harvest Mouse Surveys 2023

Ashley White

WMG held six training events in October and November 2023, as part of the Mammal Society's annual National Harvest mouse survey. As in previous years, we targeted under-recorded parts of the county, with a spread of events held across Wiltshire in Conkwell, Cotswold Water Park, Downton, Amesbury, on Pewsey Downs, and on the Pertwood Estate. In south Wiltshire we enjoyed joining forces once again with the Salisbury and District Natural History Society, and we offer a big thank you to all our hosts.

Being out in the field searching for harvest mouse nests on a weekend morning is a gentle way to start the day, although the six people that found an incredible 42 nests in two hours on the Amesbury site may not agree!

This coming autumn we will be organising more training events, focussing on under-recorded parts of the county, and hope to encourage those who have received training to continue to search for and record harvest mouse nests when you're out for a walk.

Please do get in touch to let us know if you would like to host a harvest mouse survey training event in autumn 2024. More information about the National Harvest Mouse survey can be found on the Mammal Society's Website here: <https://www.mammal.org.uk/science-research/harvest-mouse-project/>

Spring Walk 2024

Robyn Owen

In the depths of winter let's think back to the delights of spring and our first WMG spring walk in Boyton, near Codford.



We started our walk at Ginny's Cafe car park welcoming some brand-new members to the Group. It was a beautiful spring day, so we had high hopes for lots of mammal signs and sightings. We walked east along the river, counting a few mole hills until we reached the charming village of Sherrington. Here we searched the churchyard for possible bat droppings and hedgehog poo, meandered over the river looking for signs of otter or water vole and into a woodland hoping to spot a fox or some chewed hazel nuts that a dormouse had for breakfast.



We had intended to hike up onto the open grassland, but we had spent that much time searching the undergrowth and talking about weird and wonderful critters, our bellies were beginning to rumble and we were in need of sustenance (we never learn!). So, we headed back up a small lane to Boyton, scouring the grassland for hare. On the way we spotted a glow worm and some fantastic common Morel Mushrooms, *Morchella vulgaris*. The group enjoyed a well-deserved lunch at Ginny's café afterwards and told tales of inquisitive seals and bats in lofts!

Sadly, we did not manage to see many mammals, however we did spot a good number of mole hills, small mammal burrows and squirrel dreys, which meant we could do some training of the Mammal Mapper App. And although we try to choose areas that haven't been explored previously or recently, the purpose of these walks is to connect with each other by sharing knowledge about mammals, where they might occur and how to protect them in Wiltshire. It's a way for members to meet some of the committee and each

other, with the hope that members will link up and go on their own mammal spotting adventures.

Thank you to those who attended, and we look forward to seeing you and others at our next Spring walk in 2024!

On the Hunt for Hedgehogs in Great Cheverell

Abi Gazzard

In the last year, we set out to explore the land in Great Cheverell that is home to 'Found Outdoors', an organisation that was set up by locals Fiona and Rich Cassidy to provide a 54-acre natural outdoor setting of woodland and meadows.



Hedgehog footprints look like tiny human handprints (above). The tunnels that they wander through (below) are approximately 1.2m long and constructed from corrugated plastic, to be used again and again. © Abi Gazzard

The ultimate goal is for the land, which they purchased in 2020, to be rewilded whilst also providing space for education and arts. It would be fantastic to be able to compare the status of wildlife on the site during the

various stages of rewilding, including that, of course, of mammals.

One such mammal that Fiona and Rich were interested in monitoring is the humble hedgehog. So, in June-July we decided to see if we could find any hints of hedgehogs at Found Outdoors. A simple and user-friendly way to do this is to deploy footprint tunnels. Footprint tunnels record the inky prints of any small animals that pass through the tunnel, tiptoeing over the



strip of non-toxic ink and white paper to reach the hedgehog food in the middle. Hedgehog footprints are very distinctive, so it's (almost) a completely fool-proof survey method.



A splattering of small mammal footprints left in one of the tunnels at Found Outdoors. © Abi Gazzard

Ten tunnels – and a camera trap here and there – were set up and left in place along field margins, hedgerows, fallen trees and other linear features that hedgehogs would tend to follow. Found Outdoors is made up of multiple woods and meadows, so to cover all habitat types, we rotated the footprint tunnels into other locations after one week of surveying. The research shows that this should be plenty of time to capture hedgehog footprints, provided they are present!



Spot the tunnel, on site at Found Outdoors. © Abi Gazzard

Much to our disappointment, however, we were unsuccessful in capturing any signs of hedgehogs at all. This is despite the fact that hedgehogs have been observed by residents on the neighbouring land, in gardens and around houses.

One potential repellent to hedgehogs observed at Found Outdoors was the presence of multiple active badger setts. Hedgehogs tend to be found on land away from badgers, which are considered intraguild predators of our spiny friends. That is not to say that the two cannot co-exist. Hedgehogs and badgers have occupied the same habitats for many thousands of years, and still today, they are observed sharing spaces in back garden feeding stations. Perhaps then, in order

for both to happily use the land at Found Outdoors, food availability needs to be improved. Invertebrate prey diversity and abundance is bound to increase over time with the rewilding activities that are planned for the site. Already since owning the land, Rich and Fiona have observed a huge change in invertebrate life in their meadows, and the grasslands were buzzing with insect chatter as we set the tunnels up.

Hopefully, given some time (and food), we will see hedgehogs moving into the area in the future.

Tisbury Young Nature Watch

Inés López-Dóriga



In 2023, Young Nature Watch (YNW), the Tisbury and District Natural History Society (TNHS) branch for young people (including those young-at-heart!) had a diverse programme of hands-on activities, including a few mammal-related ones. For example, a bat box workshop, where our participants got to build bat boxes and learn where best to place them and encourage bats in their gardens through the provision of food sources. Also related with bats, we did a dung beetle survey with Gareth Harris and learnt about their contribution to bat diets. With the help of Peter Thompson, we also baited some carrion beetle traps with some stinking dead mice and mustelids we found over a few months and stored in our freezers. But perhaps the highlight was being able to visit a beaver lodge in a nearby estate, where beavers have been secretly living in a stream for a few years. Finally, we collaborated with Wiltshire Mammal Group and Salisbury and District Natural History Society in the fantastic owl pellet dissection event last November with Ric Morris. As you can glean from this, our activities are very varied!

For this year's programme, we only have one mammal related activity planned so far, which is a dormice nest box workshop. We intend to build dormice nest boxes with the help of young people and deploy them in support of a National Dormouse Monitoring Programme local site. However, we have also recently acquired a trail camera thanks to a grant from the Wiltshire and Swindon Biological Records Centre. This camera will be loaned to our members with the aim of helping them find out what wildlife is around them and improve the biological records (although our secret aim is, of course, mammal records) for our area!

Although we are based in Tisbury, we welcome anybody on our activities (free for <21 years old and members; small fee for adult non-members). We are also looking for inspiring leaders and ideas for mammal-related activities for future events. If you would like to contribute to a more positive future for mammals, what better than to share your mammal fascination with the younger generations? If any of this sounds interesting, get in touch via email (youngtnhs@gmail.com) or through our online platforms <https://www.tisburynaturalhistory.com/>

<https://www.facebook.com/tisnathist>

<https://www.instagram.com/youngnaturewatchwilts>).

Taking part in a National Hedgehog Survey

Wiltshire joins the National Hedgehog Monitoring Programme

Abi Gazzard

Most of us know that hedgehogs have declined in this country over the past few decades – but how are these trends estimated and monitored? Well, detecting change in hedgehog (and many other mammal) populations is rather difficult since data are almost always incredibly limited. The first British hedgehog population estimate of 36.5 million individuals dates back to the 1950s and was based on an ambitious extrapolation of one hedgehog/acre, as observed by one chap in one habitat type in southern England. In the 1990s, an estimate in the region of 1.6 million was produced, and today this figure has dropped to 0.5 million. Both of these latter measures relied on information about hedgehog densities from varying habitats. Unfortunately, for most habitat types, such density estimates are extremely outdated, or simply non-existent!



Public Engagement for the project in Great Somerford

Whilst it does appear that hedgehog populations have experienced a downward trend in Great Britain, we clearly lack the fine-scale data needed to monitor this closely. Thus, the National Hedgehog Monitoring Programme (NHMP) was born. This new project – still in its pilot stage – is a collaboration between multiple universities and groups, including the People’s Trust for Endangered Species (PTES) and the British Hedgehog Preservation Society (BHPS). The goal is to produce

robust hedgehog population estimates across different regions and habitats using systematic and repeated camera trapping surveys.

Following discussions with the NHMP team in 2023, Wiltshire was offered up as a regional hub for the next stages of the project. Five sites are needed per “hub” – volunteers from Wiltshire Wildlife Trust and the Biological Records Centre will be running two, whilst members of Wiltshire Mammal Group will be getting involved in three more. Our group secretary, Miranda, in connection with Malmesbury and District Natural History Society, has done a fantastic job so far of stirring up interest in two sites in North Wiltshire (Great Somerford and Malmesbury) through a variety of talks and meetings. We will also be exploring options for an urban centre site with Peter Thompson from Salisbury and District Natural History Society.

The surveys will kick off in 2024 with the help of local residents and hub volunteers. Camera images, once processed, will end up on an online portal in [MammalWeb](#) for volunteers to identify hedgehogs and other species. We look forward to getting started, gathering the data, and reporting back to you all! Whether we record positive results or not, the information will be invaluable for tracking the status of hedgehogs in Britain.

Beavers in Wiltshire

Giles Wagstaff

Since the early 2000s there has been a steady growth in the number of beavers in the south of England despite it being an offence to release beavers into the wild. Apart from the one officially sanctioned population on the River Otter in Devon, there are now well-established populations on the Kent Stour, the Tamar (Devon and Cornwall) and the Bristol Avon, as well as smaller populations on the Wye, Exe, Taw and, more recently, the Dorset Stour and Hampshire Avon.



Beaver dam north of Bath (Giles Wagstaff).

Beavers, it seems, are remarkably good escape artists and about half of the beaver enclosures in England have experienced at least one escape. Nowadays, all new enclosures require a licence from Natural England and licence conditions mean that the owners of the beavers have to recapture any escapees and make improvements to the fencing to prevent further escapes. So far there have been no new wild populations arising from a licensed enclosure but in the pre-licensing era it was a different story. The fact that there are now wild populations close to the locations of most of the early enclosures, tells you how effective enforcement then was. More recently, new beaver populations have been the result of illegal releases, a practice that has become known as beaver bombing.

The first beavers released in Wiltshire were probably those that went into a small enclosure on the By Brook in the early 2000s. The enclosure fence was clearly inadequate and was apparently not designed to contain juvenile beavers. That the kits came and went as they

pleased was evidenced by a number of fruit trees being felled in the landowner's garden. After a few years, the beavers were no longer wanted and the adults were apparently taken away but, by then, any kits born had absconded. There are still beavers living in this area and on the Avon at Bath – if these beavers are descendants of that first release they must, obviously, be very inbred but it is possible there have been illegal releases to top up the population. There seems to have been a gap of more than ten years between that first release of beavers and sightings of beavers on the By Brook and Avon becoming common.

At a similar time beavers were released in an enclosure in the Cotswold Water Park. The first reports of escapes reached Natural England in 2006 and some of the beavers got as far as Oxford. These beavers were apparently captured and neutered but there were more escapes by the winter of 2013-14 and regular reports of wild beavers from then until at least 2019. There are possibly some remaining in the area but they are presumably unlikely to persist for long, given beavers typically don't live much beyond 15 years.

In the last five years there has been a growth in sightings of beavers in Wiltshire, mostly on the Bristol Avon and, its tributary, the Frome. It seems there have been illegal releases in a number of locations and there is some evidence to suggest the beaver bombers make use of off channel ponds and lakes. In 2022, Natural England commissioned a survey of much of the catchment which found there were a minimum of 13 beaver territories on the Avon and Frome, including its Wiltshire tributaries the By Brook and Semington Brook. Recent records have shown the population continues to spread and they can be found along much of the main river between Bath and Malmesbury.

Managing beavers

Beavers became a European Protected Species (EPS) in October 2022, giving them the same legal protection as otters, bats and dormice. With the beaver's reputation for building dams and burrowing into riverbanks, it's inevitable that some people will be concerned about the impacts of beaver activity. With that in mind, Natural England have devised a series of class licences designed to permit trained people to take action to solve

problems as quickly as possible, avoiding bureaucracy, whilst still ensuring beaver welfare.

As a novel species it is important to help people adapt to living alongside beavers, and so Natural England have been running training events across the south of England. These events are aimed at land and riparian managers that may be impacted by beavers (such as riverside farmers) and others that work with and advise people who are living with beavers. The events are designed to give people the skills and knowledge to allow them to register for one of the class licences to manage beaver impacts and so far 270 people have been trained (which is probably about one trained person for every two wild beavers in England). The courses range from a one-day course for a simple low risk licence that permits people to remove dams and infill collapsed burrows outside the beaver breeding season, to a three day course, for beaver experts, which allows them to manage dams, burrows and lodges all year round and, as a last resort if all other options have failed, to trap and translocate beavers that are causing an unacceptable level of damage.



Cricket bat willows felled near Bradford-on Avon (Giles Wagstaff).

The licensing regime fits within a five-step management approach and people are expected to start with the lowest impact options and only move on to the next step if the previous one isn't suitable or is ineffective. The five stages are:

- 1. Engage with beaver management groups and learn about beavers. Wiltshire, Avon and Somerset Wildlife Trusts have got together to form a beaver management group to help**

THE WILLOW

I used to be a lovely willow
Ten feet tall I stood
But then I spied some furry
bastard
Eyeing me up for wood.

"I want some lumber for my
dam,
Some branches for my
cache"
So the vicious git chewed
through my ankles and to
the ground I crashed.

They stripped my leaves,
they stripped my bark, They
left me in the nude They
carried away little bits of me
And used me for their food.

So now I'm slowly rotting,
A home for bugs and rats
And gone are my dreams of
one day being
One hundred cricket bats.

By Giles Wagstaff

people adapt to living with beavers in the Avon.

2. Make space for beavers, for example by leaving uncultivated buffer strips.
3. Manage conflict through low impact actions that do not require a licence such as using mesh guards to protect trees from beaver felling.
4. Lower impact actions that require a licence such as removing dams or infilling collapsed burrows outside the beaver breeding season.
5. Higher risk activities such as managing dams, burrows and lodges in the breeding season or, as a last resort, translocating beavers.

So far there have been few serious management issues reported in Wiltshire. One landowner lost four cricket bat willows worth £500 each but received a Countryside Stewardship Scheme grant of £84 per tree to put protective weld mesh guards around the other 600. Given that the overwhelming majority of conflicts occur within 20m of the water's edge, creating unfarmed buffer strips can be an easy way to reduce conflict. Buffer strips also have other benefits in terms of improving water quality and habitats for other species.



Caught on CCTC – a beaver making its way through the Bathford paper mill on the By Brook (photo © Portals).

The recent appearance of beavers on Wiltshire tributaries of the Hampshire Avon is an interesting development. It is an important fishing river, designated for Atlantic salmon, and sea and brook lamprey and also important for grayling and sea trout. While some anglers are very positive about the presence of beavers, others are understandably concerned, especially about the effects of beaver dams on fish migration during periods of low flow. One of the class licences would be suitable for fishery managers needing to manage beaver dams to aid fish passage and guidance is being produced that will help people understand when it is necessary to intervene to create flow over or around dams for fish to use.

It seems inevitable that beavers will continue to spread and it's important that we focus on learning to live with them, as we do with other protected species. Natural England is aiming to help more people learn about beaver management and will happily put on a training event in the Bristol Avon if there are enough land and riparian managers in Wiltshire wanting to know more. Please contact beaverlicence@naturalengland.org.uk if you may have a need to manage beavers and are interested in attending a beaver management event.

Giles Wagstaff, Natural England

Further Reading

Bristol Avon and Somerset Frome Beaver Management Group - [Avon / Somerset Frome - Beaver Management](#).

Harrington, A., Rothwell, A., Harrington, L. A., Dalton, L., and Campbell, R. D. 2023. Wild beaver population assessment on the River Avon and tributaries. Natural England Commissioned Report NECR470

Heydon M.J., Pouget, D., Gray, S., Wagstaff, G.F.E., Ashton, M.E.M. & Andison, E. 2021. Beaver reintroductions in England: 2000 – 2021. JP036. Natural England, York.

Natural England [Beavers: how to manage them and when you need a licence - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](#)

National Polecat Survey

Katherine Morley – Carnivore Conservation Officer,
Vincent Wildlife Trust



Polecats are a seldom seen but charismatic native mammal. A member of the mustelid family, they are related to stoats, weasels, badgers, otters and pine martens. Typically nocturnal, solitary and leaving few field signs, they are difficult to study and so Vincent Wildlife Trust (VWT), a mammal research and conservation charity, is appealing to members of the public for sightings of polecats. These records will help us to build a picture of their current distribution in Britain.



Image Credit Anne Newton

Once thought to be the third most common carnivore and widespread in Britain, they were relentlessly persecuted in the 19th Century resulting in near extinction by the early 20th Century when they were confined to areas of mid-Wales and some English border counties. Thanks to a combination of factors, including legal protection under the Wildlife and Countryside Act

1981, they have been bouncing back in recent decades. VWT has been monitoring the polecat with national surveys since the 1990s, and this year launches the fourth National Polecat Survey.



Image Credit Richard Bowler

If you see a polecat in 2024 or 2025, VWT would like to hear from you. To take part in our survey please submit sightings of polecats (and polecat-ferrets) to us at enquiries@vwt.org.uk along with the location (grid reference) and any photographs/videos you have captured. This includes road casualties and polecats caught on trail cameras. Sightings can also be submitted through the wildlife recording app iNaturalist ([National Polecat Survey 2024-2025 · iNaturalist](#)), on social media or over the phone: 01531 636441.

Follow the National Polecat Survey on [Facebook](#) and X(Twitter) [@Polecatsurvey](#) and find out more online at [National Polecat Survey \(2024-2025\) – The Vincent Wildlife Trust \(vwt.org.uk\)](#)

The Codford Hedgehog Project

Gareth Harris

Last year, we shared some of the successes arising from the Codford Hedgehog Project, but let's start with a little recap.....

In November 2021 we were invited to present a short talk on hedgehogs and their conservation to the members of [Codford & District Gardening Club](#). What became very apparent within minutes of arriving, was that almost everyone had stories to share of the hedgehogs in their gardens, and that people were spread around the village (and indeed, the district), so this clearly related to more than one very busy hedgehog!

The ideas were sown for further study, and so we returned in spring 2022. Working with the indefatigable and appropriately named Tiggy, and many other villagers, we delivered training in the use of hedgehog footprint tunnels to survey new areas and encouraged villagers to record sightings of their hedgehogs and submit this information to us. We began collaborating with the many people who were feeding their hedgehogs and who monitored their hedgehogs using trail cameras and wildlife CCTV systems! It was very, abundantly, clear that the villagers of Codford really love their hedgehogs. Tiggy continued with footprint tunnels and camera trapping with several villagers in 2023.

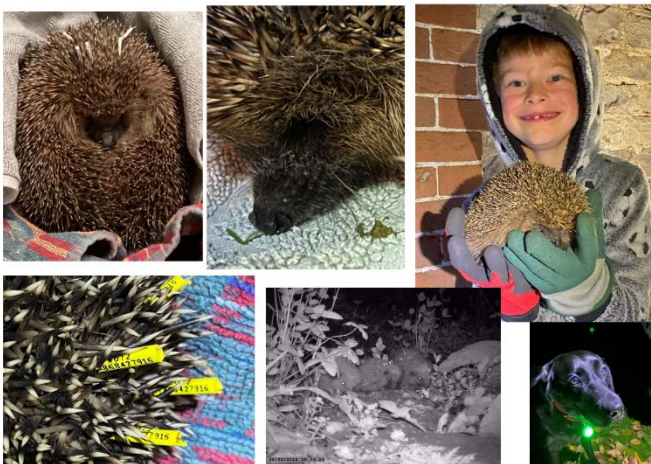


Image credit Gareth Harris

In the latter part of 2022, we secured a licence from Natural England and trialled the use of individually-numbered spine tags – these would allow us to individually mark the hedgehogs, in a very safe manner, to monitor their movements around the village. And

specifically, to begin answering the question of how large the home ranges of some of the hedgehogs may be, which gardens they were visiting and what can we do to improve the routes they use to commute around the village? We renewed the Natural England licence to continue the project in 2023 too.

In Autumn 2022, we tagged 25 Hedgehogs - many of these animals were regularly reported during this period from the original garden as well as the surrounding area. Interestingly, only one of our tagged hedgehogs was found dead on a road, but several were never seen again. We targeted some of the hedgehog feeding stations each week for tagging and monitoring, but we also conducted walked transects throughout the village looking for marked and unmarked hedgehogs in various gardens, green spaces and pastures.

	New HH tagged	Retrap encounters	Grand Total
2022	25	53	78
2023	43	90	133
Grand Total	68	143	211

In Spring 2023, it was heartening to re-encounter many of our tagged Hedgehogs, some of which have gained nicknames and are frequently seen in certain gardens and foraging areas. Its abundantly clear that Hedgehogs are clearly very habituated and have preferred foraging areas and routes.

In 2022, our survey period was somewhat compressed into the period August to November (simply because that was the duration of the licence), so we were able to deliver almost weekly visits to the village and hence the retrap rate appears somewhat higher.

During 2023, we were licensed to survey from March through to November, and so we undertook monthly visits, to achieve a spread of survey effort, and undertook additional visits where we could, and encouraged villagers to report sightings too.

And so, in 2023, we tagged a further 43 Hedgehogs, and generated a further 90 retraps, by walking a similar transect around the village. It was interesting to note some of the differences with 2022:

For example, in 2022 we generally encountered more Hedgehogs in gardens than we did in 2023. This was echoed by some of the gardeners and those with feeding stations too. Anecdotally, it feels like the

drought conditions of 2022 may have pushed Hedgehogs into gardens, perhaps in search of both food and water?

During 2023, it became clear that certain horse pastures and green spaces such as school playing fields were also very productive places for finding Hedgehogs, with some individuals becoming almost predictable.

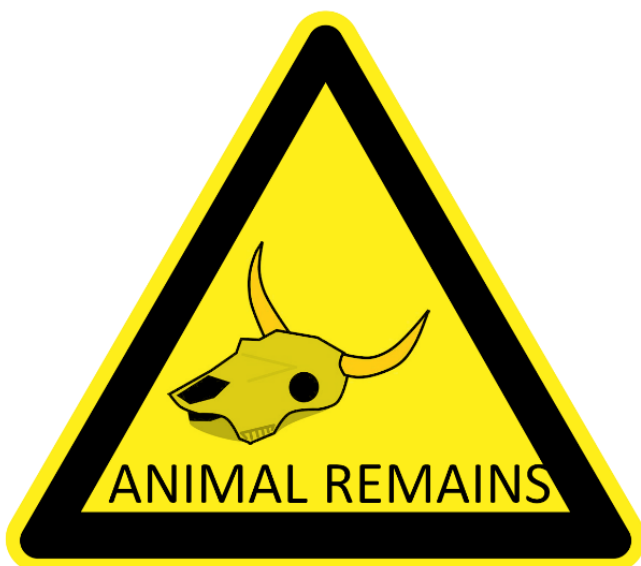
As I write this, I am awaiting confirmation from Natural England that we can continue for a third and final year in 2024. A year ago I wrote here of my concerns that the winter flooding would impact our hibernating Hedgehogs – a year later, and we are experiencing perhaps one of the wettest winters in living memory, and my thoughts again turn to wildlife such as Hedgehogs and Hazel dormice hibernating on the ground in woodland, hedgerows and gardens.....I look forward to “meeting” many of our tagged Hedgehogs again in the coming spring.

We are grateful to the villagers of Codford for the warm welcome and considerable help, especially to Tiggy, Bridget, Kathryn, Selina and Stuart and to fellow surveyors, Abi, Lisa, Ines and Robyn.

Gareth Harris, County Recorder

Research using Animal Remains

Inés López-Dórig



Did you know that some mammal remains may be collected and useful for different research purposes? If

you like recording mammals when you are out in the wild world, you can go a step further and also sample the remains of mammals! The sampleable remains may be the mammals themselves (if they are found dead, of course!) or their excrements (faeces and regurgitations). Sounds exciting, right?

First things first: a warning that, although immersing your hands in some decomposing random stuff may sound tempting, it is advisable to wear gloves before touching any of this. Secondly, not all mammal remains are useful for research, and we need to leave things for the scavengers and decomposers. So, before you fill your boots, have a look at [our checklist of sampleable mammal remains](#). In summary, protected species (such as bats, dormice, hares, hedgehogs and otters), and sometimes their excrements, are often worth sampling. These remains may be used in different post-mortem analyses, to find out the cause of death, and health, demographics and disease threats in our wild mammal populations.

In addition, owl pellets are not strictly mammal remains but they do contain mammals and are also interesting for sampling. Both WMG and [the Mammal Society](#) are currently collecting owl pellets for dissecting and studying the small mammals that make up the diet of these birds. If this sounds remotely interesting, keep an eye out for a WMG dissection workshop later this year.

Like for any other type of mammal record, when sampling mammal remains, it is important to record what you are sampling, when and where. In our website, you can find the details of where to submit your samples. However, should you need any assistance, either with the storage of the samples or the submission process, we are happy to help. Get in touch with wiltsanimalremains@gmail.com

Harvest Mouse Surveying

Anna Forbes, ARK Senior Project Officer

There are 260 chalk streams in the world and here in England we have 224 of them, including the Kennet and its tributaries.

What makes them special is their cold, clean and clear water, which supports a wealth of native wildlife. Action for the River Kennet (ARK) is a registered charity, as well as being the Rivers Trust for both the Kennet and Pang catchments. So, you may expect us to be in the river, which we often are, doing a variety of work from river habitat improvements to water vole surveying; however



how the land is managed is equally important. Our projects are run at a breadth of scales. To make bigger impacts today's thinking is very much at a catchment scale, so you'll see us not only working in rivers but by them and sometimes quite far away from them too.



In 2020 whilst carrying out some autumn hedge maintenance on the hedge for wildlife which surrounds the conservation grazing area at our Stonebridge Wild River Reserve, Marlborough, some volunteers had come across a tiny mouse, which they duly photographed.

Gareth Harris, Wiltshire's County Mammal Recorder confirmed the identification, which was extremely



exciting as mammal trapping had been carried out in the past but had not recorded harvest mice. In November 2020 Gareth generously shared his time and expertise with ARK and spent the day at the reserve, a 15 acre water meadow with the Kennet flowing through it training our Senior Project Officer Anna Forbes and a number of our volunteers how to survey for Britain's smallest mouse.

Everyone thoroughly enjoyed learning about the mice, seeking out the woven nests they make, then logging each using the mammal Mapper App. For ARK the surveying is great community involvement with the site, it helps us expand on our understanding of what is living where and it is good to know we are contributing to local and national data on a Biodiversity Action Plan species that is classified as Near Threatened in Britain.

The majority of nests have been found in the scrub habitat area and the wetland, with occasional nests found in the hedging and the tussocks and rushes within the eastern conservation grazing area. In our most recent survey in December 2023, we additionally found a couple of nests in the unmanaged bramble/vegetation buffers at the west end edge of the water meadow, once again evidencing the value of untidy wild spaces.



Harvest mouse nest. Image credit Anna Forbes

Our most recent survey yielded 16 nests, which although not our highest count year was encouraging as we know we will have no doubt have not found them all!

Our volunteers have a great sense of camaraderie and are not put off by the challenge of locating the nests and it is a real sense of satisfaction when they discover one, volunteer quote, 'I was so happy to actually find a nest all by myself, it made my day!!'

Control of American mink

A necessary component of a successful Water vole recovery project

Gareth Harris

I have outlined elsewhere in this newsletter (and previous editions) my concerns over water voles in Wiltshire. Catchment-scale water vole surveys were undertaken widely in the county in the 2000s-2010s by organisations such as the Wiltshire Wildlife Trust, but survey activity has declined since then, largely due to a lack of resource to do so. Consequently, water vole records in the county are becoming increasingly old, and out-of-date. Greater survey efforts are required in the county from all parts of the environment sector to ensure our knowledge is accurate and current.

An essential part of any water vole recovery, whether nationally or locally, is the control of non-native,



American mink footprints. Image credit Gareth Harris.

invasive American mink. Any amount of habitat enhancements for water voles, will fail without associated control of American mink too.

Back in the 2000s, Wiltshire Wildlife Trust led a partnership of organisations and landowners in the establishment of coordinated control of American mink in four key areas, with Mark Satinet leading on three of these, and the Cotswold Water Park Society (now, Cotswold Lakes Trust) leading on the fourth, the Cotswold Water Park. The Cotswold Lakes Trust have sustained coordinated mink control in this area since 2002, and this continues today (and yes, the Water vole populations have responded well, as well as waterbirds). Elsewhere in the county, and more recently, mink control has largely been sustained by river keepers and land managers, but the wider landscape-scale coordination has been limited.



Water vole courtesy Steve Deeley

Excitingly, in 2023, new partnership projects were launched to re-establish mink control in areas needing it, and to support and develop existing control activity. Wiltshire Wildlife Trust re-commenced activity on the river Wylde, whilst farmer groups launched projects elsewhere in south Wiltshire (such as the Ebbel valley).

Inspired by [reports](#) of the success in east Anglia of the work of the [Waterlife Recovery Trust](#), Wiltshire Mammal Group, and its partner organisations, has invited Professor Tony Martin to Wiltshire to present and share their work; a series of mink control projects in Wiltshire will be attending to share their work too.

The mammal group is hosting this event on Wednesday 27th March 2024, entitled, “**A new approach to control of American mink in Wiltshire - as part of a wider Water vole recovery strategy**”. Keynote speaker will be Professor Tony Martin, and he will be joined by speakers and projects from elsewhere in Wiltshire. See [here for further information on this event, and to book your place.](#)

American mink Control on the River Ebbel

Simon Smart, Chalke Valley Farmer Cluster

The American mink, *Neovison vison*, is a well-known non-native and invasive species. It spread throughout the country following escapes, and intentional releases, from fur farms in the 1950s and 1960s. It is a very active and opportunistic predator which can have a devastating impact on our native wildlife, particularly ground nesting birds and water vole populations, whose population has declined drastically due to mink predation, including on the Ebbel.

From remote camera footage from a local resident and friend of WMG we now know that we have mink in the lower reaches of the River Ebbel, near Homington, as well as recent sightings near Broad Chalke. This coincides with water vole surveys carried out in 2021 and 2022 as part of the Cranborne Chase National Landscape’s Crystal Clear Ebbel Project, by the Wessex Rivers Trust and volunteer groups, which found limited fresh field signs of water voles (feeding stations, active

burrows, droppings etc). Habitat and water quality are relatively good, suggesting predation by mink (a key reason for the water voles decline nationally) is the limiting factor for water vole population recovery in the River Ebbel.

In response to this the Chalke Valley Farmer Cluster successfully bid for funding from the Crystal Clear Ebbel Project for 14 mink rafts to install along the River. These have the option to both monitor using footprint surveys and replace these with live-capture traps (fitted with otter guards) when mink presence is confirmed.



American mink raft. Image credit Simon Smart.

To support raft monitoring we are also using a remote trap monitoring system which has been used very successfully in recent mink eradication and water vole re-introduction projects in Eastern England. This will make the process much more efficient, effective and humane by providing an alert to live traps.

AGM with Guest Speaker Dr Steve Carter

Gareth Harris

It was brilliant to see a large turnout for the AGM in October, undoubtedly drawn by a brilliant speaker! A



Dr Steve Carter, Vincent Wildlife Trust

Huge thank you to Dr Steve Carter of Vincent Wildlife Trust who gave a fascinating talk about reintroducing pine marten, wildcats and European mink. Exciting also to showcase our brilliant new logo designed by Richard Cassidy of Found Outdoors and the recently launched Wiltshire Small Rewilders Network (find them on Facebook!).

As is the case for many AGMs, we were delighted to welcome new committee members, Abi Gazzard and Ashley White, whilst sadly waving goodbye to Robyn Owen.

Surveys for Hazel dormouse, Langley Wood NNR

Sarah McAuliffe

I am the reserve manager for Langley Wood National Nature Reserve (NNR), a large expanse of broad-leaved woodland situated on the northwestern tip of the New



Dormouse footprints. Image credit Sarah McAuliffe.

Forest and located adjacent to the new RSPB reserve at Franchises Lodge.

Between September and November last year, with the help of Natural England volunteers, I set up and carried out footprint tube surveys in Langley, hoping to find evidence of dormice.

Historically there have been dormice in Langley, however, I believe the last official records were over 20

years ago. To be honest, we didn't hold out much hope of finding evidence of them as the woodland has been so badly impacted by deer in recent decades, leaving almost no understory in much of the woodland. Langley is also cut off from neighbouring active populations by busy roads and poor hedgerow networks, making it harder for them to move across the landscape.

We found some suspect footprints in October, and they were verified by Gareth Harris, who I'm sure you all know! This is fantastic news and shows just how resilient and resourceful dormice can be. We are hoping that conditions in the woodland will improve in coming years with habitat and deer management work underway. It could be interesting to carry out another survey within the next 5 years or so to see whether there is evidence of increased dormouse activity as the habitat improves.

These findings will contribute to mammal group datasets and be included in future updates of [Mammals in Wiltshire](#), the county mammal atlas.

Wiltshire Mammal Group would just like to add that we were delighted to support these surveys through the loan of survey equipment, including our 50 dormouse footprint tunnels.

Logo Refresh

There is no doubt our old logo was looking, well, a little bit old! It needed a refresh but none of us on the committee had the expertise to do a good job of it. Luckily though, good friend of Wiltshire Mammal Group, Rich Cassidy of Found Outdoors, came to our rescue and what an amazing job he did!

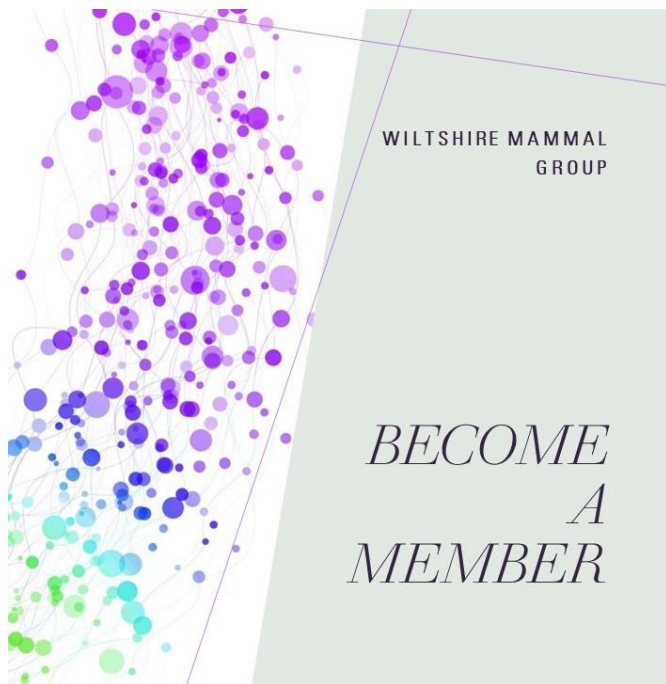


When we decided to update the logo we asked our members and followers on social media which mammal they felt best represented Wiltshire and the brown hare came out on top. Rich took this information and produced a look which is up-to-date and says Wiltshire to the onlooker at a glance. We were particularly pleased with the combination of the hare with the downs above and the grasslands below. Rather than a white horse we have a white hare!

From all of us at WMG, thank you Rich so much we are thrilled with our new logo.

Be First to Hear About these Events

As you have seen WMG is a very active conservation organisation. Becoming a member means that you get priority access to mammal surveys such as dormice, harvest mice and hedgehogs before they are opened up to the general public.



Members also have priority booking online for our online talks on a variety of mammal related topics. WMG also provides training in survey techniques and mammal signs and identification.

We also offer our members the opportunity to loan our survey equipment for free including Longworth Traps, dormouse nest tubes and hedgehog survey tools.

There are other benefits too...

Through us you will receive the Mammal Society's monthly email and regular updates from The People's Trust for Endangered Species.

What's more you will be part of an organisation of like-minded people making a difference to the mammals of Wiltshire which are in desperate need of your support. You'll feel good about giving back and all of this costs only £10 per year.

Email wiltshiremammalgroup@hotmail.co.uk to join and we'll be in contact straight away.

Plenty More in '24

Looking forward to 2024, we have a variety of activities planned throughout the year, featuring our theme of **Riparian Mammals**. Here are some dates for your diary:

- **9th March** – A refresher course for those who came to our Owl Pellet Training event last November
- **27th March** – A new approach to American mink control. A presentation followed by a round table exchange of experiences and ideas
- **March to November** Dormouse survey season
- **10th July** – Water voles, a national approach to saving 'Ratty'.
- **June** – Water vole field signs event
- **October to November** Harvest Mouse Nest Surveys
- **15th October** – Wiltshire Mammal Group AGM
- **November** – Winter Walk

Thank You to our Partners & Funders

Wiltshire Mammal Group enjoys the support of, and collaboration with, a number of organisations and individuals across the county. All are warmly thanked.

Most importantly our thanks to Richard Cassidy, Found Outdoors and the Wiltshire Small Rewilders Network, for redesigning our logo – we love it!

In 2023, we received funding from WSBRC via their [Small Grants Scheme](#) contributing to the purchase of new camera traps, and then also from the Nurturing Nature Project which supplied additional dormouse footprint tunnels used to deliver surveys in Cranborne Chase National Landscape. Thank you!

[Forestry England](#) supporting projects in The Savernake, Collingbourne Wood, West Wood, the Braydon Forest and Grovely Wood, who continue to be mega supportive.

[Simon Smart Black Sheep Consulting](#), who has supported the harvest mouse surveys since 2017 and so much more!

[Tisbury & District Natural History Society](#), in particular, Peter Shallcross and Inés López-Dóriga

[Salisbury & District Natural History Society](#), especially Peter Thompson.

[Malmesbury and District Natural History Society](#)

Ric Morris, Shropshire Mammal Group, not only for delivering two superb owl pellet workshops with us in

November 2023, but for his regular inputs on the Facebook Group to people's enquiries about skulls and bones.

Rick Minter of Big Cat Conversations for delivering the evening talk in the spring, and for his ongoing support and input to all things large and feline.

Giles Wagstaff and his colleagues at Natural England for all beaver-related support and collaboration.

Jonathan Thomson (Underhill Wood) for supporting ongoing studies of small mammals and bats and hosting our spring dormouse survey training in 2023.

Longleat Center Parcs, Wiltshire Wildlife Trust and The Woodland Trust for supporting the ongoing dormouse studies.

Action for River Kennett (ARK), and especially Anna Forbes and her colleagues, for supporting harvest mouse surveys and promoting water vole surveys.

The villagers of **Codford & Codford & District Gardening Club** for supporting our hedgehog studies.

Our thanks also to a considerable number of private landowners across Wiltshire who host various surveys and monitoring projects and who routinely provide access and a warm welcome.

Wiltshire and Swindon Biological Records Centre and the Nurturing Nature team.

The **Mammal Society** is warmly thanked for supporting the harvest mouse surveys again, whilst **People's Trust for Endangered Species** is thanked for supporting our hedgehog studies.

Thank you also to the photographers who share their images to enliven our website and newsletter, in particular, Peter Thompson, Steve Dewey & Steve Deeley.

If you enjoyed this newsletter, why not check out [Wiltshire Bat Group's newsletter too](#)