

# Newsletter of the Staffordshire Mammal Group No 20

April 2010



## A Word from the Chairman

Derek Crawley

### Dear Mammalogist

What a winter, the cold and then the snow, the worry if the Conference was going to happen partly due to low bookings and partly due to the snow. Well it did, with 52 delegates attending. We have had good reviews about the range of talks, the quiz and the Sunday walk in the Churnet valley.

Several national experts brought us up to date on polecats, otters and pine martens, with local research and expertise discussing bats, dormice and water voles. Since the conference was open to all, many colleagues from neighbouring mammal groups attending to hear how Derek Yalder's passion for the Peak District shows that recording should not be just a county affair (this is something he later expanded on at the National Mammal Society Conference [see later]). Again the importance of national recording was highlighted by a preliminary report into the first season of the national Small Mammal Monitoring Scheme (SMMS)

With plenty of time to chat with like minded people during the day and forge friendships and new ideas the day flew past. One talking point was a photo I D competition to name species from body parts and field signs. Rob Strachan the author of "Mammal Detective" won with 17 out of 30, so may be it was a bit. The Sunday saw 20 people risk the thawed then re frozen ground in the Oakamoor area. Snowy footprints, pine marten and dormice boxes, field voles runs and even a very obvious hibernating brown Long eared bat was seen before a late lunch at the Ramblers Retreat where more mammal matters were discussed.



Part of a Muntjac's Head



Otter and Rat foot prints

The snow did stop us in the end in February when the roads were blocked and that stopped us from putting in an otter holt. Something that we still intend to do so watch out for extra events via email and on the web.

The programme should be out for the summer but there are lots more events happening especially Dormice box checks so keep checking the web or pass on your email to me.

See you soon cheers Derek

## Prospects for Pine Martens

"Prospects for Pine Martens", is an ambitious project which aims to assess and publicise the status of pine martens. Funded by Natural England, Countryside Council for Wales and Environment Wales, the project explores the options for conservation with decision-makers, trials and establishes methodologies for data collection, and ultimately provides current data on the distribution, status and genetics of pine martens. This two-year project is the first time that the VWT has had a member of staff working full-time on pine martens.



Although the "Prospects for Pine Martens" project covers the whole of England and Wales, the work will be mainly focused in areas with high numbers of sightings (built up over some 14 years). The Lake District in particular has been selected as a focus point due to its high number of sightings, and our Pine Marten Project Manager has relocated there to establish intensive monitoring sites in the region. The focus here will be on DNA collection through hair-tubes and the collection of photographic evidence from camera-traps.

Other important hotspot areas for pine martens include Northumberland, North Yorkshire, Derbyshire, Staffordshire and much of Wales, particularly Snowdonia, Ceredigion and Carmarthenshire. Such an extensive area will require a collaborative search effort, and so we are hoping to build on existing partnerships already in place as well as engage new local individuals and community groups keen to work with us and each other to track down pine marten evidence.

To find out more about the project or how you can help us with pine marten work, please visit [www.pinemarten.info](http://www.pinemarten.info) or contact Neil directly: [neiljordan@vwt.org.uk](mailto:neiljordan@vwt.org.uk) or 07799847740.



**HAVE YOU SEEN A U.F.A.?**

If you've seen an **UNEXPECTED FURRY ANIMAL** in England or Wales, and suspect it may have been a **PINE MARTEN**... we'd love to know!

The Pine Marten is one of Britain's rarest mammals. Help us to conserve remaining populations of this elusive animal.

Please Phone **01531 636441** or log on to **[www.pinemarten.info](http://www.pinemarten.info)** NOW!

The Vincent Wildlife Trust  
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Registered Charity No. 1111181  
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After a local story about pine martens in the Chase Post we had 3 reports of possible PMs in the area. Although auto suggestion is one thing, it is important to keep their profile in the public eye. As this does mean that if someone sees one we get to hear about it sooner rather than later. So if any one can put up a poster near them contact either the SMG or Derek or go directly to Neil at the VWT

# A winter like it used to be....

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Did you enjoy the snow and cold this winter. It was certainly whiter than we have had in recent years. Staffordshire did not seem to have as much snow or for so long as many other places in Britain, but we certainly had extremely cold periods. I know a lot of frogs died under the 5cms of ice that covered most small ponds. How would other animals have fared. Prolonged snow cover reduces the amount of grazing available and certainly deer populations have suffered in Scotland. Herbivores larger than a rabbit would find nutrients in above ground woody vegetation causing considerable damage to trees, from both eating bark and new shoots. We should see this in years to come as stunted trees with odd shapes and dieback. The smaller herbivores voles and mice would be content beneath the snow which will protect them from carnivores. As the snow melts their tunnels though the snow can be seen. The cold is the main problem for those animals active throughout the winter, but a warm shelter and plenty of food will keep most alive. Shrews will suffer as the amount of invertebrates active in the cold is much less and as they have to eat their own body weight a day more will die than during warmer winters. Rats, mice, voles and even shrews will move in to buildings for warmth and food, but should be looking to move out now that spring is here.

Predators should not have a problem as they can scavenge from the starved herbivores, but that highlights the problem that they will have very little meat on them. The snow makes hunting difficult if small mammals are under it and trying to run in a snow drift is not good. I watched a fox approach a swan trapped in ice, but such a good meal was missed as it did not want to fall though the thin ice as it would never get warm again. The swan rocked it self free from ice then stayed in the open water even though the fox was so close. Otters would have suffered too with many still waters being frozen, river fishing was the only source of food meaning more travel time and greater loss of energy I know that else where many more otters were found dead on the roads than normal as they searched for food.

The good news is that for those mammals that hibernate it was a good winter, too cold to force them to wake up half way though and use up their energy reserves. More should survive with un broken sleep patterns. This could be good news for dormice not only would they have unbroken slumber, but with snow on the ground less are likely to be found in the leaf litter where they hibernate.

As spring continues we can reflect on how this winter has affected the wildlife of Staffordshire and beyond. Nesting birds seem to be late for recent years, but not from my childhood. Many flowers are said to be late but swallows seemed early. The hare does not seem to have done badly as our hare survey showed good numbers, over 20 in one field with boxing and mating taking place and in March as it should be.

To see what difference the weather has made we need to know the population and distribution of species before as well as after an event, so help us understand more and send all those records in.

By post or email on an excel page

date	Species	location	Grid ref	Describe what you saw	Who you are	Contact address
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# Farmings answer to the energy crisis?

The Common Agricultural Policy brought in set a side to reduce the amount of food being produced. At the start many farmers wanted to grow crops like oil seed rape for bio fuel. This never really took off because the government want to add fuel (oil) tax so pricing it out of a competitive market. The latest ideas are to grow willow, Miscanthus and Phalaris crops (elephant grass and reed canary grass), for burning at local power stations to help generate electricity locally.

Miscanthus is grown a lot in Staffordshire and beyond. As a non native plant grown as a monoculture it has been assumed that it would be sterile for wildlife. So it was quite a surprise when Nick Mott and I found not only a harvest mouse nest but also a field vole nest in some during the recent Hare Survey. There was also a high number of spiders present on the stubble of the recently harvested area.

This left us with a question of has anybody else looked at the crop for small mammals especially harvest mice?



The answer came at the National Mammal Conference **Jenny Clapham** from Cardiff University had undertaken a trapping programme to compare small mammal populations between Miscanthus and Phalaris crops and those more traditional crops in neighbouring fields.

Her findings found 6 species present in Miscanthus and 8 in Phalaris compared to 4 in the more traditional monoculture crops.

In particular harvest mice, a new BAP species was found in numbers. Also these crops are often left standing over winter and provided better over wintering success. In fact there was a peak in numbers in December.

Jenny caught 26 harvest mice at height during September and January compared to just 12 on the ground. The at height Traps (see picture) were placed on wire mesh held up by a tripod of canes. Interestingly no harvest mice where caught in the adjacent hedge during that period. No harvest mice where caught during the summer, in any of the traps. Wood mice where as you might guess, the most abundant small mammal caught.

It looks like Elephant grass is not only good for the energy Crisis but its good for wildlife too.



One of Jeanny's high tripod Longworths

# Species Profile: A swift look at the Red Squirrel

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There are often reports of Red Squirrels on the chase but so far they all seem to turn grey on further inspection. However there have been some reds that have survived the parapox on the Sefton coast and even elsewhere reds do occasional turn up in their former strongholds so lets take a look at Red squirrels

Fur colour variable from bright ginger through to red and dark brown or black tinged with grey in winter; larger ear tufts in mid-winter which disappear by the summer; bushy tail which bleaches white by late summer in some individuals  
Head/body length 180-240mm, tail about 175mm

Weight: adults up to 350g

This is the only squirrel which is native to Britain. It is active during the daytime, though in summer it may rest for an hour or two around mid-day. Squirrel nests, or dreys, are constructed of twigs in a tree fork, above a whorl of branches close to the stem of a conifer, or, less visibly, in a hole in a tree. They are lined with soft hair, moss and dried grass. Several squirrels may share the same drey, or use the same drey on different days Red squirrels spend about three-quarters of their active time above ground in trees and shrubs. Their main foods are tree seeds, especially hazel nuts and seeds from conifer cones. They also eat tree flowers and shoots, mushrooms and fungi from under tree bark. Red squirrels often suffer periods of food shortage especially during July. Red squirrels are at home in both conifer forests and broadleaved woodland. The distribution of red squirrels has declined drastically in the last 60 years and they are now extinct in southern England except for a few on the Isle of Wight and two small islands in Poole Harbour. Elsewhere in Central Britain they are confined to rather isolated populations in Wales (notably Anglesey) and around Formby in Merseyside. Red squirrels are still widespread in the North of England and Scotland, and in Ireland, but even here their range is contracting.

Red squirrels in favourable habitat can live at a population density of one squirrel per hectare of woodland. Often densities are lower than this. They survive for up to six years in the wild.

Red squirrels are protected by law, and may not be intentionally trapped, killed or kept, or have their dreys disturbed except under licence.

Historically, red squirrel populations in Britain have fluctuated widely, the species disappearing from many areas at times and recolonising at a later date. However, in the 1920s red squirrels began to be replaced by grey squirrels, introduced to about 30 sites from eastern North America, between 1876 and 1929. Red squirrels seem unable to survive in the presence of greys, but the reasons for this are not fully understood. There is no evidence that grey squirrels aggressively chase out red squirrels, but recruitment of young red squirrels seems to be reduced in the presence of greys. Grey squirrels brought a disease, parapox virus, with them from America to which they are immune but which usually kills red squirrels. The key as to why grey have replaced red squirrels seems to be their ability to compete for food in different types of habitat. Red squirrels live in all types of woodland habitats from pure broadleaf, to mixed broadleaf and conifer, to pure conifer. However it is believed they prefer pure conifer forests because they can forage in them more efficiently and survive in them better than in broadleaf forest. Grey squirrels digest acorns better than red squirrels, so have done much better in southern Britain.



It is believed that the only real way to ensure the continued presence of red squirrels in an area is, if possible, to keep grey squirrels out, or, at least to keep their number low. This may be achieved by habitat management to alter the tree species composition and age structure of woodland to suit red but not grey squirrels (favouring conifers, not oaks). Special food hoppers which provide food for red squirrels but not the heavier grey squirrels, might help to tip the balance in favour of red squirrels.

## Did you see the rut or hares boxing?

Out of both of these wildlife spectacles which we try to show you, the rut is by far the easiest, this is because these animals tend to have traditional areas (stands) which they use. So they can be easily found year on year. Once in the rough area you can hear the roars of the call. This year we missed the main event as our third Sunday meetings are fixed, but for hares we were spot on. Both events are partly controlled by the local weather conditions and of course disturbance. Even at Silver trees where the deer are used to people the number of people looking and not just with our group had the fallow bucks moving about and calling more at night than during the day. With programs like "Spring Watch", photographic magazines and "BBC Wildlife" all showing us how easy it is to get these action shots, the public is doing just that but with out the field craft of experts and the respect for the animals rights. Even those of use with digital long zoom lens still want to get that bit closer, but just like "Life on Earth" shows us it takes weeks to get that perfect shoot. Or being lucky to be in the right place at the right time.

Photos from the SMG hare day



Photos taken later that week



Paul Thomas has been waiting years for this shot



# Mammal Society Easter Conference

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With Just over 20 papers being presented over the weekend and a field trip to Anglesey to see the red squirrel project plus lots of drinking time to discuss mull over new ideas and joint ventures, it was a hectic but enjoyable time. The conference has produced an abstract booklet which I can email to you if you would like a copy, just drop Derek a line. It would be difficult to say what was best except speaking to over a hundred like minded souls, the highlights

- Working out the best places to see bottlenose dolphin in Wales and why
- The discovery of greater white toothed shrews in Ireland as well as an introduced bank vole population
- Harvest mice in elephant grass
- Otter using the Pembroke rocky coastline

Derek Yalden the president of The Mammal Society calling for a **National Atlas of mammals for the British Isles** by 2015

Although we have produced our atlas we still want to show off Staffordshire's mammal populations so we need those records more than ever. Plus once you have started then do not let county boundaries stop you.

## *This is how you can get involved*

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**SMG** Dormice box surveys

Dormice in hedgerow survey using old drinks containers

Pine marten surveys

contact Derek for more details

### **The Mammal Society**

Small Mammal Monitoring Scheme 1<sup>st</sup> April - 31<sup>st</sup> May and 1<sup>st</sup> Oct - 30<sup>th</sup> Nov

Recording Invasive Species Count (RISC) Project - Muntjac Recording

For more details look at the web page <http://www.mammal.org.uk>

or Contact your Regional organiser Derek Crawley

### **Peoples Trust for Endangered Species**

Living with mammals April - June

Mammals on the road July - September

For more details look at the web page <http://ptes.org/>



# Staffordshire Mammal Group Aims

Increase mammal awareness

Record mammal distribution

Provide training

Give advice



## *The committee is-*

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Staffordshire Mammal Recorder

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Please do come and lend a hand on any of our activities days.

You are always welcome whatever the weather.

Hope to see you soon

