



I. Andrews

Dormouse - *Muscardinus avellanarius*

The adorable dormouse is rarely seen due to its nocturnal lifestyle and the fact that it spends about half of the year asleep! When active it lives in the tree canopy but in late autumn it moves down to the ground to hibernate amongst tree roots and under moss and leaves, and does not wake up again until April or May.

If you are lucky enough to see a dormouse, it is easily distinguishable from other small mammals by its honey-coloured fur, big black eyes and furry tail.

Dormice eat a variety of foods throughout the year, adapting their diet as the seasons progress. Early in the year they may feed on hazel catkins and pollen, moving on to honeysuckle nectar and aphids in mid summer and berries, seeds and nuts in the autumn.

The presence of dormice may be revealed by a nest situated in bramble or low-growing shrubs. The nest is about the size of a grapefruit, with an outer layer of leaves that are often green as they are picked from the tree rather than collected from the ground, and the inside is made of woven grass or strips of bark. Dormice gnaw hazel nuts in a characteristic way; look for hazel nuts with a

circular opening with a smooth edge where the dormouse has enlarged the hole using a scooping action with its teeth.

Woodland with hazel coppice is often considered typical dormouse habitat, but broadleaved woodland with a well-developed, diverse understorey or tall mature hedgerows can also provide good dormouse habitat, and they have been found in conifer plantations as well.

Over the past 120 years, the dormouse has disappeared from at least half of its British range, and is now found mainly in south England and south Wales. Even in the south, dormice are no longer present at 70% of sites where they were known to be 120 years ago. The dormouse receives full legal protection under the Wildlife & Countryside Act 1981 and the European Habitats Directive, meaning that dormice including their nests and resting places are protected from disturbance and destruction.

The dormouse is widespread throughout Kent, and whilst it is likely to have suffered a decline in the county that reflects the national trend, Kent is considered to be a stronghold for the species. The decline of the dormouse is linked to the loss of



woodland, and the loss of hedgerows in the country. In order to expand their territories, dormice need to access new woods via hedgerows as they do not like to travel along the ground or across open spaces. Therefore, the loss of hedgerows has resulted in many remaining patches of woodland being isolated. Also, the practice of coppicing, which makes dormouse habitat more suitable for it, has declined.

Dormice have been recorded breeding in the conifer plantations at Bedgebury Pinetum in Kent. Bedgebury's dormice nest in birch scrub and are thought to feed on aphids and pine seeds. Elsewhere in Kent, dormice are probably present in most of the larger woodland blocks in the county. Surveys by Kent Mammal Group have found that they are normally present in semi-natural woodlands of 20ha or more in extent.

Nest boxes have been put up at more than twenty-four sites in Kent, which allows more dormice to nest and produce young in each patch of woodland. The nest boxes also make it easier to monitor their populations and the data collected contributes to the National Dormouse Monitoring Programme. The Kent Biodiversity Action Plan aims to extend the nest box scheme.

Preventing further loss and fragmentation of woodland, securing appropriate woodland management including coppicing and linking up isolated populations through woodland and hedgerow planting will be crucial to maintaining and increasing the number of dormice living in Kent.



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FURTHER INFORMATION:

UK Biodiversity Action Plan: www.ukbap.org.uk

English Nature: www.english-nature.org.uk

Kent Wildlife Trust: www.kentwildlife.org.uk

Kent Biodiversity Action Plan: www.kentbap.org.uk

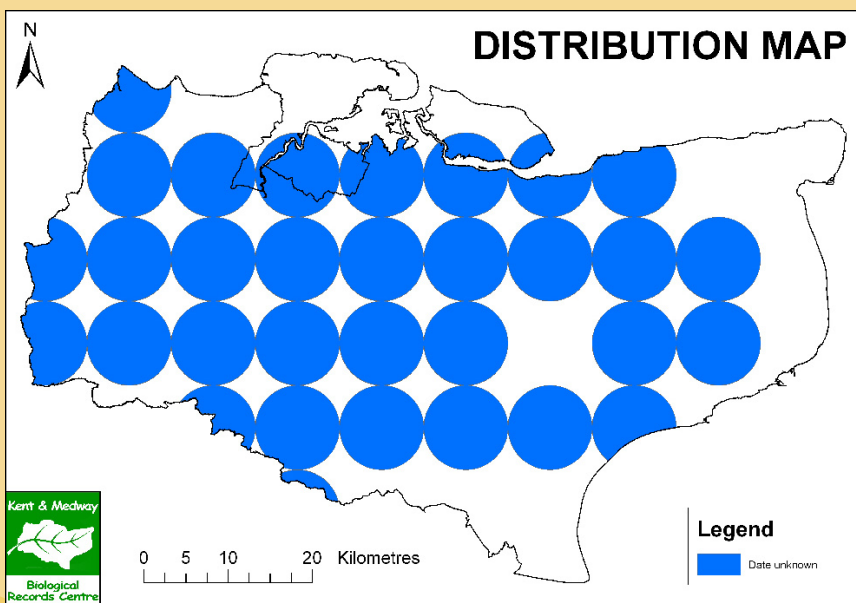
The Kent Red Data Book, available from
Kent County Council: www.kent.gov.uk/biodiversity

Mammal Trust UK: www.mtuk.org

Kent Landscape Information System:
www.kent.gov.uk/klis

Kent and Medway Biological Record Centre:
www.kmbrc.org.uk

The Mammal Society: www.abdn.ac.uk/mammal



Data courtesy of Kent Mammal Group