



Dormice and Conifers in the Wyre Forest ~ 2006 Update

Phil Rudlin

The year of 2006 has been a strange one! The winter was longer and colder than for many years, which is how it should be for hibernating animals such as Dormice. However the spring was also cold but wet which is not so good. The summer was hot and long, which gave way to an autumn feast for all sorts of creatures. So how did the Dormice fare this year? In short – better than last year!

Fig. 1

	2003		2004		2005		2006	
	Dormice	Nests	Dormice	Nests	Dormice	Nests	Dormice	Nests
May	5	1	6	2	12	2	15	3
June	14	0	11	0	14	2	11	8
July	5	0	19	0	17	5	6	4
August	9	1	13	1	8	0	4	1
September	19	4	19	0	8	4	10	3
October	16	0	28	9	4	16	18	8
Totals	68	6	96	12	63	29	64	27

It was with slight trepidation that we started our box checks in May after such a poor year in 2005. However 15 mice were found in the research area, which compared well with other years. (Fig. 1) June also gave reasonable numbers. However in July and August just 10 animals were found. On the surface this was not good news. Under normal circumstances we would expect to find more animals and also some litters of young. However, it was felt that due to the high temperatures during these months, that the mice had found other, cooler nest sites to utilise. We did find one litter of Dormice, which was in a box on the north side of the tree and was perhaps cooler than some others. One project for the future may be to monitor the temperature of boxes to see if the position has any effect on occupancy. This theory was strengthened by the autumn inspections, where better numbers were found, including 13 young.

It was also encouraging to find more young Dormice over the year than 2005 and this may be a sign that numbers are on the increase again:

2003 - 26 Juveniles
 2004 - 34 Juveniles
 2005 - 11 Juveniles
 2006 - 22 Juveniles

Although overall numbers are still not as good as they have been, another encouraging sign is

the number of nests found in boxes. These are nests, which have either been partly or fully made by Dormice, but we have not found an animal in them. It can be frustrating to find nests but no animals. However, as we only check the boxes 6 times a year and Dormice can have up to 10 other nests to choose from each day, it is inevitable that we will not see all the animals in the area during these inspections. Recording nests is just as important and fortunately Dormice nests can be identified confidently, almost without exception.

A further 25 animals were found in the research area that were big enough to microchip, which is also up on last year. (Fig. 2)

Fig. 2

Treatment No	No of Dormice chipped in 2004	No of Dormice chipped in 2005	No of Dormice chipped in 2006
1	4	0	3
2	7	4	12
3	13	3	9
4	8	3	0
Sausage	3	0	0
New plantation	Not surveyed	3	1
Total	32	13	25

This is especially encouraging as 3 of these were in an area where Dormice numbers seemed to have declined since the thinning experiments of 2003/04 (Treatment 1).

All areas are now developing well and the scars from the Forestry operations are hardly visible. (Photo 1) Due to the low numbers of deer in the area the areas clearfell are growing well and if they are not being utilised by Dormice now they soon will be. Last year we found two Dormice nests in the clearfelled area of treatment 4 where there were no connections to the tree with the box on. This year one of those boxes had a Dormouse in it in May. (Photo 2) We were not expecting them to utilise these areas for four or five years so this is interesting to see and we shall now put some boxes up in the other cleared areas to see when they move into those.

Photo 1



Photo 2



Both Images

Phil Rudlin

A total of 64 animals were found in the research area in 2006, which is only one more than last year. (Fig. 3) However, taking into consideration the hot weather in the summer and the increased number of young found it can be considered to be a good year.

6 animals have now been followed for a number of years. (Fig. 4) One of these animals was, unfortunately found dead. However, hopefully we will be able to follow some of these for a few more years as Dormice are said to live up to five years – watch this space!

Fig. 3

Treatment No	Dormice found 2005	Recaptures	Dormice found 2006	Recaptures
1	4	1	4	1
2	23	4	28	9
3	26	5	28	10
4	6	1	2	2
Sausage	0	0	0	0
New Plantation	4	*	2	1
Total	63	11	64	23

Fig. 4

Date micro-chipped	Age when micro-chipped	Number of boxes used	Number of recaptures	Approximate age in 2006
Sep-03	Mat	5	7	4
Jul-03	Mat	4	4	4
Sep-04	Juv	2	6	2
Oct-04	Mat	2	2	3
Oct-04	Mat	3	6	3
Oct-04	Juv	3	3	2

Another encouraging sign is that some boxes that have not been used for some time have been occupied this year. 3 boxes that were erected in 2002, and 1 from 2000 were used for the first time. Also 2 boxes that were erected in 1993 were used for the first time ever – that's 13 years of waiting! One of my theories from 2004 was that the boxes were getting old and were, perhaps less likely to be used by Dormice. 50 were replaced where Dormice had used them in the past – both these boxes that were used for the first time were old, damp and rotten boxes. Perhaps they aren't as fussy as I thought!

Reminder of treatment methods:

Treatment 1

(Hand cut with chainsaws and forwarder extraction - autumn) Small areas of conifers were felled (approx 20mx20m) to create small glades within the crop. The idea being that these would regenerate naturally in years to come and would provide viable habitat for Dormice by the time of the next operations in 5 years.

Treatment 2

(Harvester operation with forwarder extraction – winter) method as treatment 1.

Treatment 3

(Harvester operation with forwarder extraction - Winter) Normal thinning operation removing 30-35% according to standard thinning tables.

Treatment 4
(Harvester operation with forwarder extraction - autumn). Two larger areas of conifers were felled (approx 0.3 Ha). This replicates the normal coppice size in the broadleaf scrub habitat, which Dormice favour. Again this should regenerate naturally in years to come and would provide viable habitat for Dormice by the time of the next operations in 5 years.

26% of the boxes have been used in the research area at least once since 2002. (Fig. 5) Note that 85 of the boxes in the research area have been in place since 1995. Data prior to 2002 is not included in any statistics from research area but are included in 'Old boxes' and 'All boxes' data.

Fig 5

	Research boxes	Old boxes	All boxes
Total No of boxes occupied	82	149	206
Total occupations	230	739	871
Total boxes	310	300	525
% occupied	26% *	50%	39%
* since 2002			

There is still disappointment in the area we called the sausage due to its shape on the map. This was a planted in 1995 with Corsican Pine. It has failed as a crop, but has a good shrub layer of Oak and Birch regen with thick bramble and bracken with a thin mature Oak canopy. In the last few years this has been a good area for Dormice. Left undisturbed completely by the thinning operations it was considered a buffer zone where the mice would be able to recover if the habitat was unsuitable after the work. However over the last two years the signs of Dormice have declined. 5 animals were found in 2003, 6 in 2004, 1 in 2005 and none in 2006. Most significantly no new unoccupied nests were found which suggests that the Dormice were not using this area. Reasons – unknown!

2006 records

The above figures are for the research area of Ribbesford. However this does not tell the whole story. There are now almost 550 boxes in the whole woodland: 325 in the research area and a further 215 in the surrounding woodland. 300 of these boxes have been in Ribbesford for over 10 years now. If we just look at these old boxes it gives better idea of the population trends. 2006 is, hopefully an improving year!

Charts 1 and 2 show the number of Dormice found in October and throughout the year respectively. 2006 has been the second worst year yet. There are, however encouraging signs that things are improving. The numbers found in October were the second highest for the last six years and good numbers of young were found. Again the numbers found in the old boxes mirror those in the research area. The long term hope is that the numbers in the research area will be better than those outside, as it would mean we are improving the habitat for Dormice by good management!

No signs of Dormice have been found in any of the boxes in the mainblock of Wyre in 2006. They have been useful for Wasps and Bats – so they are not wasted!

Much of this work could not have been accomplished without the assistance of our Forest Research department. I would like to thank Roger Trout for his support over the last 6 years. I would also like to thank Liz Appleton who has spent her second summer as a volunteer in Ribbesford. She is now fully trained to microchip Dormice and will be licenced to do so in 2007. Liz will hopefully continue to help monitor our Dormice for the foreseeable future.



Dormouse

Rosemary Winnall

CHART 1 - OCTOBER OCCUPANCY BY DORMICE

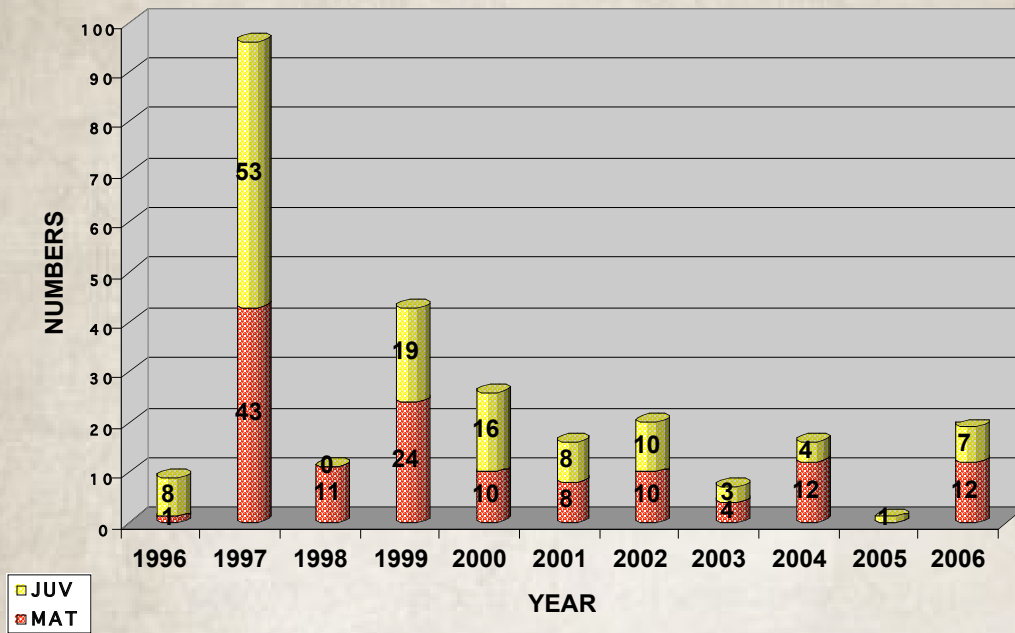


CHART 2 - TOTAL NUMBER OF DORMICE FOUND IN BOXES 1996 -2006

