

crayfish, and suggests that the original cause of the Bell Brook infection is still present and would have to be removed before re-introduction of native crayfish. If human activity is responsible for the plague introduction then access to the stream would have to be carefully managed or eliminated first – and that could be a challenge.

Conclusion

Native crayfish are still present in Forest Lodge Stream, and whilst this is good news, the White-clawed Crayfish is still vulnerable to extinction locally. Crayfish Plague has been identified in a tributary to Bell Brook, which may have been introduced by visitor activity in the forest. The decline of the native crayfish, the expansion of Signal Crayfish populations and the spread of Crayfish Plague in the Wyre Forest seems to mirror the general national situation.

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Harvest Mouse breeding nest along hedge, Button Bridge, 26 November 2018

Rosemary Winnall

Our Search for the elusive Harvest Mouse

ROSEMARY WINNALL



Harvest Mouse at breeding nest

John Robinson

"Here's one!" came Ian Wright's exultant cry from along the hedgerow. This was music to my ears as Ian and I had dedicated one day for a Round Wyre Search by car on 14th November 2018 to look for evidence of Harvest Mice, and here was the success we'd dreamed of!

The publication of Worcestershire's Mammal Atlas in 2012 (with records up to 2007) drew attention to the paucity of records for this small mammal in our locality. There were no recent or historical records shown for 10km squares SO67 SO77 or SO78, although we know that in the 1980s John Robinson had found several nests in hedges and a bean field north-east of Fastings Coppice on the Shropshire side of Wyre. But this farm has since changed from growing crops to breeding cattle and the fields are no longer suitable for Harvest Mice.

The Worcestershire Mammal Group decided to encourage folk to search for old Harvest Mouse nests by running a couple of training days in 2016 in conjunction with the Worcestershire Wildlife Trust. I attended one of these during which Johnny Birks demonstrated the field skills needed to find these nests.

Around that time Ian Wright had been finding Harvest Mouse nests along tracksides and margins of arable

fields near his home in Great Witley. He generously shared his knowledge with me, took me to see some of his sites, and taught me how to recognise suitable habitats and nests.

Harvest Mice (Britain's smallest rodents), are small delicate mammals. Adults weigh up to 6gram, about half the weight of a House Mouse. They are mainly nocturnal and are rarely seen in the wild, but we can record their presence by finding their distinctive nests. They shred leaves and weave grasses to construct circular breeding nests (about the size of a tennis ball) above ground amongst tall grass, bramble and cereal crops. The leaves are often left attached to their stems providing support for the nest which is often wedged between strong grass stems. The female then stuffs the breeding nest with chewed grass and/or thistledown. She may have up to 3 litters a year, but each breeding nest is used only once. She enters and leaves the nest without leaving a visible hole, but if the nest is found with an opening, it is likely that the youngsters have used the nest for a day or two after becoming independent.

The non-breeding nests are usually lower down in tussocks of grass or in hay or straw bales. When haystacks were a regular feature in fields, this was a popular place for the mice to spend the winter. Now they have to find protection in rough ground and hedgerows. Because they are so small, these mice are vulnerable to hypothermia during cold wet conditions so they avoid making their nests under overhanging branches of trees and bushes from which dripping rain can result in winter chilling.

Their breeding season is from May to October, so the best time to search for the abandoned breeding nests is in the autumn and winter, especially before heavy rain and snow has compressed the vegetation. Harvest Mice don't hibernate like Dormice, so they need to find food throughout the year, feeding on vegetation,



Old breeding nest, 26 November 2018

Rosemary Winnall

seeds, and insects. Once the field crop has been harvested they need wide field margins containing a variety of tall plants. Ideally this should not be machine-topped enabling the plants to continue to seed and provide thick winter cover for both the mice and insects on which they feed.

Ian Wright's success at finding nests around arable land in his area increased our hopes of finding them around Wyre. I used Google Earth to locate areas of arable land that might be suitable for our searches and highlighted rights of way that we could use. Then we set off in the car for our Round Wyre Search, parking at suitable stopping places to look along hedgerows and in rough grassland. The first nest we found was in a hedgerow next to a pull-in into a field near Button Bridge. We were well pleased! It was the first recent record for SO77 and our first record for Greater Wyre.

I then approached 2 landowners in this area and they kindly gave us permission to walk along their field margins to search for more nests. This is when we invited mammalogist Stephen Harris and his wife Alex from Bristol to come and help us and we knew we would benefit enormously from their expertise.

We visited the area on 24th November 2018 and I extended the search on 26th November 2018. To our delight we found 9 more Harvest Mouse nests in 3 monads. Surprisingly one Dormouse nests (and a possible second) was also found in the locality well away from woodland. Stephen Harris explained that Dormice particularly like hedges that have been laid and the horizontal branches act as aerial runways for them.

The Dormouse nest is larger than that of the Harvest Mouse and is constructed in a different way, often incorporating honeysuckle bark and leaves. Grasses are not split as seen in the nests of Harvest Mice. The one we found was constructed inside the hedge and higher above ground than the nests of Harvest Mice. I wonder if we'll be able to locate more hedgerow nesting sites for Dormice as we continue our searches?

From this short survey we learned to spot suitable habitat from a distance avoiding hedgelines with overhanging trees. We looked for wide dense open field margins, especially those with scrubby edges, and also rough field corners with grassy tussocks. We found that Cocksfoot *Dactylus glomerata* was a favourite grass for the breeding nests, especially if it was growing alongside the hedge or within bramble growth.

My thanks are due to Stephen and Alex Harris for their encouragement, enthusiasm, information and good company on our searches. Adrian and Rachel Robinson and Ben Moule kindly allowed access onto their land and John Robinson generously provided some of his superb photographs to illustrate this article. I would never have become involved in the search for the elusive Harvest Mouse if Ian Wright had not kindly shared his interest and local knowledge - thank you Ian!

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Harvest Mice

John Robinson

Wyre Forest Study Group



Harvest Mouse nest above, Dormouse nest below R. Winnall



Harvest Mouse exiting nest

John Robinson



Site of first nest found on 14 November 2018

Rosemary Winnall