# Derbyshire Mammal Group News

Autumn 2005 (Issue 6)

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**Annual Membership**
**£5**

The Derbyshire Mammal Group is affiliated to The Mammal Society

**In this issue:**



## An Atlas of Derbyshire Mammals

Derek Whiteley, Group Recorder

At our AGM earlier this year we decided to start work on a project leading to an atlas of Derbyshire mammals – that is a publication of maps showing the distribution of each species in the county. For now, the message is that we need to do a lot more recording. During the autumn I will get our database up to date and prepare a set of maps as a guide to unrecorded squares so that we can target our fieldwork in new areas.

But don't wait for these. Get out there and record some new squares. It would be nice to say that by 2010 every one km square in the county had been visited by a mammal recorder.

Some species that require special attention are brown rat, house mouse (definite records only please) and grey squirrel (in central and southern parts of the county). Bank vole and field vole are also very under-recorded.

Every record counts for the Atlas.

Bank Vole
Courtesy of EN

## Birds and Bods Quiz

Some of you will recall the quiz sheet sold to raise funds for the Group. There is now on sale a new quiz on a theme of birds raising funds for the Derby Local Group of the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds. The usual mix of cryptic clues and puzzles are included and there are general knowledge questions on sport, television, music etc with answers referring to birds. The closing date for entries is Saturday 14th Jan 2006 so you have all autumn to do it!

To obtain a copy send s.a.e. and cheque for £1 payable to "RSPB" to Bird Quiz, 12 Chertsey Road, Mickleover, Derby DE3 0RA

## Water Shrew Update

Helen Perkins

Results in so far from the Mammal Society's Water Shrew Survey have already considerably increased our knowledge about the distribution of this elusive small mammal. The project enlisted volunteers to collect water shrew droppings by encouraging the animals to feed in plastic tubes baited with fly larvae. The survey started in December 2004 and is due to finish at the end of September 2005. Over 1000 sites have been surveyed by volunteers so far, with water shrews recorded at 16% of these. So far, more water shrews have been found in static or slow flowing water and where there are earth banks as opposed to rocky banks. The preliminary results also indicate that water shrews are found more often at sites where occasional bankside vegetation management is undertaken.

Locally, water shrews have been recorded at several new sites using this survey method, for example at Carsington Reservoir, Long Clough Nature Reserve in the North West of the County and along sections of the River Wye. More details about the baited tube survey method are available on the Mammal Society's website (www.mammal.org.uk).

Dr Steve Furness has recently provided some fascinating insights into water shrew behaviour. He has spent many hours observing their activities in his garden pond near Calver. Steve noticed for example that water shrews often stir up mud in search of prey, so it's worth looking out for patches of turbid water along streams or in ponds. Burrows may also be worth looking out for; though these are small, Steve has noted that they are distinctively oval in shape and vertically flattened.

Information about the national Water Shrew Survey taken from The Mammal Society's newsletter for Water Shrew Survey Volunteers, Summer 2005.

## Batty bit about bats

John Bland

On the guided walk at Calke Abbey on June 4th 2005 with warden Bill Cove we were delighted to see the bat called serotine. While others discussed how serotines appear at Calke for three weeks each year to eat cockchafers over the meadow I pondered how they got their name. I did some research, finding out other odd facts on the names of bats on the way.

I'd expected pipistrelle to be linked to pipit or the Latin word pipere, meaning to cheep, which is the root of pigeon, but it comes from a corruption of vespertilio. The church service of vespers is in the evening - the Latin uesper meant of the evening and is linked to "west". Pipistrelle therefore is sort of "little one of the evening".

Noctule arose in scientific French apparently from the Italian name nottola, which stems from notte meaning night. Of course that links to the Latin nocturna for night. Noctua is Latin for owl and is seen in the species name of the little owl *Athene noctua*. The scientific name of noctule, *Nyctalus noctula* doubles the sense of "of the night".

I had thought the word bat would stem from Latin just as we get cat from cattus and rat from rattus but it comes from Old Norse. The Middle English word was bakke, which links back to blaka, which meant to flutter and of course an old name for a bat was a flitter mouse.

Daubenton, who gave his name to the bat was Monsieur Louis Jean Marie D'Aubenton, who was born in France in 1716 and was a pioneer in the field of comparative anatomy. He was named demonstrator of natural history to the Garden of the King where he studied fossils, plant physiology and agriculture. After the revolution he became the first director of the French natural history museum. He died of apoplexy in 1800.

So, why is a serotine called a serotine? The answer was quite easily found in the dictionary for "serotine" is an adjective in English, which means late and stems from the Latin serus. The explanation is alas far from clear. The bat does not seem to come out later in the evening than other bats or stay out later, or indeed emerge from hibernation later. Perhaps the name arose at a site where the serotine arrives later in the year after being somewhere else eating cockchafers.

## A Day and Night at Calke Abbey

Ian Wildbur & Jo Bissell

On 4th June 2005 the Derbyshire Mammal Group had the opportunity to go to Calke Abbey to look for signs of, and hopefully see, wild deer during the day, and serotine bats at night.

After meeting Bill Cove (National Trust Head Warden at Calke) and other DMG members in the car park, we had a very easy time spotting our first fallow and red deer; Bill took us into the deer park enclosure! It is thought that the deer park was first created at Calke by Sir John Harpur in the 1600's, with Sir Henry Harpur-Crewe building a deer shelter in 1773. The deer were then contained in an actual enclosure in 1973/74 and then after the National Trust took over the house and grounds in 1986/87, it was extended to the layout that it is today.

Red Deer Stag
by Laura Berkeley

There are around 80 fallow and between 25/30 reds (adult stock). The number of fawns born, dictate the number for the cull in the next winter. Due to the limited number of reds on the site it has been necessary for them to be closely interbred, however, this has not caused any abnormalities. Of the red it is usual for only one stag to be 'holding' hinds that are coming into season. The fallow, however, break up into 8-10 different groups with lots of changing and swapping going on.

Other items of interest in the park were the henbane and hounds tongue and a fox's earth with the scattered remains of duck, rabbit and pheasant.

From here we were taken by mini bus to some woodland on the estate with limited public access. Slightly more testing than the deer enclosure! We did manage an excellent view, at the end of one of the rides, of two wild fallows but for the rest of the time it was fleeting glances.

Bill found a munjac track for us, it is amazingly small, and showed us how the new shoots on the trees were grazed upon by the deer leaving a beautifully clipped browse line. He also showed us some saplings where the bark had been removed by muntjac rubbing their antlers against them, causing the death of the tree. On the fringe of the wood we were shown a badger sett with a well-worn entrance.

Back on the bus to Ticknall Brickyard. This was to show us the devastation that deer can cause if the numbers are left to increase unchecked. The Brickyard is within a mixed broadleaf wood where there is a small lake and the remains of the old kilns. The deer have stripped the ground of all vegetation. Bill said there are plans to fence off a section to keep the deer out and hopefully a recovery can be made. Back to the car park and we were to reconvene at 9.15pm for a view of the serotine bats.

With bat detectors at the ready we wandered down to an area on one side of the house with a wild flower meadow. We were a little early for the bats but with a bit of patience the bat we had all come to see made an appearance. The serotines are at Calke Abbey for only a short period of time – about 3 weeks – taking the cockchafers (may-bug). We also picked up (not literally) noctules, pipistrelles and walked down to the lakes to see the daubentons.

Our thanks to Bill who was prepared to give up his day off to show us around, we had a really interesting day and night.

Calke Abbey
Courtesy of The National Trust

## Squirrels and Toads at Formby

Liz Lonsdale

Seven Derbyshire Mammal Group members met at the National Trust reserve at Formby Point at around 5pm on 23rd April 2005. The reserve is situated west of Liverpool on the coast, and is comprised of shifting sand dunes and coastal woodland. We had gathered to see the isolated and remnant population of red squirrels (*Scurius vulgaris*).

Formby Red Squirrel
by Steve Docker

The National Trust takes active measures to maintain this population by encouraging the public to feed them with monkey nuts and maintaining a 'no-go' area for grey squirrels (*S. carolinensis*). There is a designated area for the public to walk round where the squirrels are regularly fed. The squirrels were easy to see and quite confiding. During the two hours of our visit we all had good views and were able to take some photographs.

The population exhibits an interesting variety of pelages from the classic gingery red to quite dark, almost black individuals. This variation is quite common in squirrel populations. Most animals appeared to be quite happy feeding on the ground, retrieving the monkey nuts left for them and burying them all around the woodland. With such an abundance of food there appeared to be little competitive interaction. Two individuals retreated at one point to the branches of trees about ten metres apart and began an excited chattering. It wasn't clear whether the vocalisation was directed at each other or at us. Eventually the light faded and we left the squirrels and foraged for our own food.

We re-assembled at the reserve at 10pm to meet the warden Gordon Parmenter and his assistants. We were led on a brisk walk, in the dark, through the woodland and sand dunes to a newly created pond, which contained both palmate (*Triturus helveticus*) and smooth (*T. vulgaris*) newts. Great crested newts (*T. cristatus*) have also been seen in the pond previously.

We continued our night walk along the beach, a surreal experience with the lights of a gas rig away across the sea. It was interesting to hear about the coastal erosion that had taken place and to know that where the waves were breaking that night would have been 200 metres inland 50 years ago.

After the stretch along the beach we headed back over the dunes to an area that had been a dumping ground for nicotine waste and hence had an unexpected variety of vegetation. In this area there are several ponds which are visited by natterjack toads (*Bufo calamita*) for breeding. At first we could hear them calling but they became silent as we got nearer the ponds. With the aid of torches we saw about a dozen or so toads, some of which were mating pairs in amplexus. They differ from common toads (*B. vulgaris*) by having a prominent yellow stripe down the centre of their backs.

Natterjack Toads
by Steve Lonsdale

Natterjacks are uncommon across the country and only live in this specialised habitat, which makes the populations vulnerable to change and disturbance. The wardens are trying to maintain the ponds for the toads, but the shifting sands make this difficult as the changes alter the water table in the area.

We walked back to the car park feeling privileged to have seen two of our rarer native species.

Why is a squirrel called a squirrel? "El" at the end of a name normally means little and you might think the "squirr" was from squire so little squire alluding to a little man because squirrels sit upright. However the origins go back further than that to the Greek *skiouros*, which is made up of *skia* meaning shade and *oura* meaning tail so the squirrel was the shade-tail. (John Bland)

## Kent Weekend 25th-26th June 2005

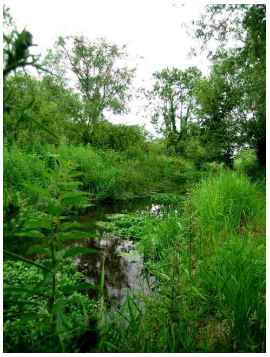
Dave Mallon

Eleven DMG members took part in one or more of the various phases of the weekend. It began with a visit to Down House, former home of Charles Darwin that has been very well restored by English Heritage. It was fascinating to see where he worked while writing *Origin of Species.* He would surely have appreciated the rose-ringed parakeets whose raucous calls echoed round the garden where he famously walked every day while thinking over difficult aspects of his great theory.

Down House
by Steve Docker

After an early evening meal we moved on to Ham Fen, a Kent Wildlife Trust reserve near Sandwich. This is the site of an experiment to manage a wetland using European beavers and *konik* ponies – a Polish breed considered to be very close to the original European wild horse, the tarpan. The warden, Pete Forrest, acted as guide and provided a detailed account of the management and beaver reintroduction. A huge amount of work had gone into organising the project and extensive negotiations had taken place with neighbouring landowners. Ham Fen comprises 70 acres and a further 30 acres of adjoining land are included in the scheme. Among other measures taken, the boundary has an electric fence to deter the animals from leaving. Despite all this, several animals died in extended quarantine due to delays over final authorisation and very few of the original animals now survive.

By a small stream lined with dense tall herbs and trees we soon found evidence of their continued presence in the form of trees and branches showing the characteristic 'sharpened pencil' profile indicating beaver activity. We settled down by a bridge to wait and watch and soon saw an adult beaver swimming out from the dense vegetation and along the stream. When it dived we were able to follow its progress by the line of air bubbles and later were fortunate enough to watch it swim right past under water, before kicking up a swirl of mud to hide its further progress. It put in two more brief appearances, giving everyone excellent views.



Ham Fen
by Helen Perkins

Sunday morning saw an early start at Wildwood Discovery Park for a private guided tour. The centre is devoted to keeping and breeding British mammals, current and extinct. There were excellent views of wolves, lynx, pine marten, badger, fox, roe, red and fallow deer, otters, Arctic fox, etc.Our guide called the badgers from their sett and picked up one compliant hand-reared individual for a closer look. One wild mammal was seen - melanistic grey squirrels around the grounds. As well as mammals there were also adders, marsh frogs and terrapins.

Then followed a visit to the captive breeding facilities, in particular water voles, water shrews and dormice. This again proved of great interest and included a demonstration of the approved technique for picking up a water vole by scooping it head first into a "Pringles™" tube!

Water Vole Breeding
Pens at Wildwood
by Steve Docker

After lunch the group dispersed in various directions: more viewing at Wildwood, Stodmarsh bird reserve and Blean Woods NNR, where the sun came out on cue for the heath fritillaries and white admirals. This was a full and very enjoyable weekend – many thanks to Steve Docker for the organisation and meticulous arrangements.

There is more on European beavers including Ham Fen in Kent and an update on reintroduction plans for Scotland in the August 2005 issue of British Wildlife p381-384. (Ed).

## Carsington Small Mammal Trapping 2005

Steve & Liz Lonsdale

DMG, in conjunction with Severn Trent Water, have continued the small mammal trapping sessions at Carsington Water which we started in 2004.

The main aims have been to continue to build on our competence and experience, as well as to extend our knowledge of the small mammals present around the reservoir, and to have some fun while doing so. During the year some 19 members attended at least one session, and we now have around 10 experienced people who are capable of carrying out live trapping for small mammals. We trapped in seven areas:

- Tail Bay: Silt ponds and a ditch, surrounded by shortish grassland and marginal vegetation; some trees along the Henmore Brook.
- Hopton Meadows: Rough grassland with a hedgerow on one boundary and the reservoir on the other.
- Hopton Pond: Rough grassland, young plantation and pond margin.
- Penn Carr: Mature woodland, rough grassland and hedgerow.
- Fishing Bank: Rough grassland, copse and hedgerow.
- Horseshoe Island: Reservoir shore and areas of sparse vegetation.
- Fishtail Creek: Rough grassland, scrub, stream banks, bramble and bracken.

In each area we set around 100 live traps, generally working in teams of 2-4 people. Traps were laid at dusk on the Friday evening, and left *in situ* until Sunday morning; the traps were checked on the Saturday morning and evening, and Sunday morning.

Animals caught were identified, weighed, sexed, aged, and their breeding condition noted; those caught on the Saturday morning and evening sessions were also marked by clipping their fur; animals were released at or near the point of capture.

The table below shows the total number of catches at each site (and the number of recaptures). For comparison, the 2004 results for Tail Bay, Horseshoe Island, and Fishtail Creek are also shown.

In total there were 1380 trap nights with 255 catches (18%), and 690 trap days with 57 catches (8%) This compares with 1146 trap nights (289 catches, 25%) and 573 trap days (80 catches; 14%) in 2004.

The difference between 2004 and 2005 on Horseshoe Island is almost certainly due to the high water levels in the winter, which left only two small areas of the island uncovered by water. It was here that we caught our biggest animal of the year – a pregnant field vole, weighing 42g.

As well as covering four new sites, we also tried some different techniques this year:

- 'Harvest Mouse' platforms. At Hopton Meadows, Hopton Pond and Fishing Bank, 12 Longworth traps were placed on platforms around 50cm above ground level, in the hope that we would be able to catch some harvest mice *(Micromys minutus)*. The design was

| | Common Shrew | Pygmy Shrew | Water Shrew | Wood Mouse | Bank Vole | Field Vole |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Tail Bay (Apr 05)** | 10 (0) | 7 (0) | 0 | 7 (3) | 3 (2) | 5 (1) |
| *Tail Bay (Jul 04)* | *5 (0)* | *2 (0)* | *0* | *22 (3)* | *32 (9)* | *9 (1)* |
| **Hopton Meadows (May 05)** | 13 (4) | 0 | 0 | 10 (3) | 14 (3) | 1 (0) |
| **Hopton Pond (Jun 05)** | 10 (1) | 0 | 1 (0) | 46 (15) | 11 (0) | 4 (0) |
| **Penn Carr (Jul 05)** | 6 (1) | 0 | 0 | 8 (2) | 28 (12) | 0 |
| **Fishing Bank (Aug 05)** | 21 (4) | 0 | 1 (0) | 20 (3) | 6 (2) | 0 |
| **Horseshoe Island (Aug 05)** | 1 (0) | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 4 (2) |
| *Horseshoe Island (Aug 04)* | *4 (2)* | *0* | *0* | *51 (24)* | *0* | *5 (1)* |
| **Fishtail Creek (Aug 05)** | 1 (0) | 0 | 0 | 24 (7) | 50 (14) | 0 |
| *Fishtail Creek (Sep 04)* | *3 (0)* | *1 (0)* | *0* | *41 (9)* | *56 (14)* | *2 (1)* |

modified between each site, and we eventually caught two wood mice at Fishing Bank. We hope to try these again next year.

- Wellfield Traps. As well as Longworth traps, we also used 13 Wellfield Traps at Penn Carr. Although cheaper, they had a significantly lower success rate than the Longworth Traps.

- Arboreal Traps. At Penn Carr, we placed 12 traps between 1.5m and 2.5m above ground on the branches of trees. None of these traps resulted in a catch.

For most of us, the highlight of the year was our first water shrew at Carsington – caught in the last trap we checked on the Sunday morning at Hopton Pond. We caught our second one a couple of months later at Fishing Bank.

Thanks are due to Ben Young and the Ranger Team at Carsington for their support and assistance throughout the year.

## Helping Derbyshire's Water Voles

Helen Perkins

Derbyshire Wildlife Trust has produced a new booklet entitled Managing Land for Water Voles. It describes the characteristics of 'ideal' water vole habitat and outlines some of the simple things that can be done to enhance habitat for the species. A series of more specialised leaflets on upland water voles has been produced jointly by the National Trust High Peak Estate and Derbyshire Wildlife Trust (DWT).

All are available via the Trust's website (see back page). Other mammal-related leaflets available via the website include: Managing Land for Otters, Living with Badgers, The Harvest Mouse, The Water Shrew, The Otter and The Polecat.

The final draft of the Lowland Derbyshire Water Vole Action Plan has been produced. Whilst actions for water voles have been ongoing in the plan area for several years, the new plan is a major step forward as it has widened the commitment to water vole conservation across the area. Targets have been set for the period 2005-2010, with agencies such as Local Authorities, DWT, Severn Trent Water, English Nature, British Waterways, Groundwork Trust and the National Trust working together to deliver the actions outlined in the plan. Comments are welcomed on the draft, which is available at:

www.derbyshirebiodiversity.org.uk

## Mountain Hares on the Beach

Derek & Sarah Whiteley

Here in Derbyshire our general perception of the mountain hare is a species that involves a bit of hill-walking to see, and is best seen in winter when it is white, set against the dark heather and cotton grass. In other places things may be different.

On holiday on the Ross of Mull in May we were delighted to see a couple of hares skipping over the marram grass each evening down onto the beach. Very early next morning they did the reverse trip back across the camp site to areas of bog and sheep-grazed pasture just inland. Further observations revealed them to be mountain hares (*Lepus timidus*) in brown summer pelage with the characteristic all-white tail. Their general behaviour and appearance reminded us very much of Irish hares (*Lepus timidus hibernicus*) which we have watched feeding and mating in the sheep-grazed pastures around Dingle on the far west coast of Ireland. Again, these animals are near sea level.

Returning to Mull in August we saw lots of hares on our evening walks – sometimes groups of up to eight animals - feeding in sheep pastures, machair, and along the coast in boulder-strewn close cropped grassland. They seemed a little more russet-coloured than our Peak District animals, again more like the Irish race. A local farmer told us that they turn white in winter but "quite late on". Apparently mountain hares were introduced to Mull and some other Hebridean islands in the nineteenth century, but it was nice to watch a familiar mammal in very different surroundings.

## Brown Hare Census

Debbie Court

The second brown hare census took place at Carsington Reservoir on 6th May 2005. The same four routes were walked as last year. This year 6 brown hares were spotted with four of these on the western side of the reservoir, whereas last year the majority were on the eastern side. The census also recorded plenty of rabbit sightings and some grey squirrels. Thanks to the 13 DMG members who took part.

There is an update on factors affecting brown hares in the August 2005 issue of British Wildlife p422. (Ed).

Johnny Birks, of the Vincent Wildlife Trust, reports two high quality **pine marten** sightings in Derbyshire. During August an animal was sighted up a tree near Eckington, this was followed in September by an animal accidentally caught and then released from a live-trap at Whaley Bridge.

## More Dormice in Derbyshire

Dave Mallon

As most DMG members will be aware, a second dormouse reintroduction took place in the county this summer, with DMG taking responsibility for managing the operation on the ground. The reintroduction site is in the White Peak on land belonging to the Chatsworth Estate and lies a few miles north of the wood in the mid-Derwent Valley used in 2003 for the first Derbyshire reintroduction. The two sites are very different in character. The first is an old oak wood on the gritstone fringe, with a hazel understorey. The new site consists of dense hazel on a steep, loose slope and is similar in many ways to the reintroduction site in the Staffs sector of the White Peak. There is a good admixture of other trees - ash, hawthorn, field maple, wych elm, sycamore, elder – and shrubs such as bramble, rose, blackthorn, white bryony that provide berries for fattening up in the autumn are also present.

A lot of hard work went into making this a success. Preliminary surveys of the site, negotiations with landowners and tenant, a detailed 'nut hunt' to make absolutely sure that there were no dormice already present, erecting 15 release cages and 200 nest boxes, transporting the 33 captive-bred dormice then providing them with food on a regular basis until they accustomed themselves to the area. A very big thank you to the 'dormouse team' and all the other DMG volunteers who helped at the various stages, as well as to PTES, the captive breeders, and the staff of Chatsworth Estate. On 3rd September we found two tiny pink babies in one nest box and an anxious mother nearby, proof of successful breeding, and making all the effort worthwhile!

***Meanwhile***, work continues at the first dormouse reintroduction site, now into its third year since the release of 34 captive breed animals in June 2003. Nest box checks were carried out in June and September 2005. Approximately two thirds of the nest boxes were checked in June, which revealed five dormice. Three were in torpor, two were very much active! Interestingly, no dormice were occupying a traditional "woven" nest; indeed no such nests were found in any of the nest boxes checked. The dormice appeared to be "making do" with other species nest material! In September, the majority of the 200 nest boxes were checked, this time nests were found but only one dormouse was at home. Steve Docker

There is a short summary of UK hazel dormouse reintroductions in the August 2005 issue of British Wildlife p423. (Ed).

**A *colour* copy of this newsletter may be downloaded from our website www.derbyshiremammalgroup.com**

## Useful Contacts

| | |
|---|---|
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| **Mammals Trust UK:** | Tel: 02074 985262<br>enquires@mtuk.org<br>www.mtuk.org |
| **Derbyshire Badger Groups:** | |
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| North East Derbyshire<br>Richard Bradbury | 07711 506012<br>margandik@freeuk.com |
| South Derbyshire:<br>Steve Grimley | 07754 094177<br>sdbg@stone3.freeserve.co.uk |
| **Derbyshire Bat Conservation Group:** c/o DWT | |
| **Sorby Mammal Group:**<br>Valerie Clinging | 01142 367028<br>president@sorby.org.uk |
| **Derbyshire Biological Records Centre** (DBRC):<br>Nick Moyes | Tel: 01332 716655<br>nick.moyes@derby.gov.uk<br>www.dbrc.freeserve.co.uk |
| **Derbyshire Wildlife Trust:** (DWT) | Tel: 01773 881188<br>enquires@derbyshirewt.co.uk<br>www.derbyshirewildlifetrust.org.uk |
| Water for Wildlife Officer &<br>Otter Project: Philip Precey | Tel: 01773 881188<br>pprecey@derbyshirewt.co.uk |
| Water Vole Recovery Project:<br>Helen Perkins | Tel: 01457 864825<br>hmperkins@yahoo.co.uk |
| **Lowland Derbyshire LBAP:**<br>Debbie Court | www.derbyshirebiodiversity.org.uk |

Many thanks to all those who contributed to this issue of Derbyshire Mammal Group News.

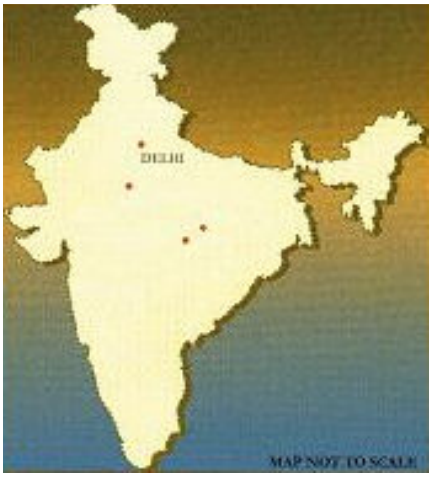
Also, a special thanks to Liz Docker who helped with the layout and design, to Laura Berkeley, Steve Lonsdale, Helen Perkins, English Nature and The National Trust for their excellent illustrations and to AES Ltd for the use of their reproduction facilities.

Please send material, details of forthcoming events, comments etc to Steve Docker: Tel: 01335 345253 or email: steve@busypeople.force9.co.uk

## In Search of the Royal Bengal Tigers

by Steve Docker

Liz and I were on the plane homeward bound from Delhi, India. Had we really seen 20 mammal species and 140 bird species, and such quality sightings, during our 12-day Indian safari? After a year of planning, our 25th wedding anniversary "trip of a lifetime" was drawing to a close. We took the opportunity of the long flight home to reflect upon a fantastic experience and to remind ourselves of some of the highlights.




We arrived in Delhi during early March 2005 where we met our Indian guide. Bunty accompanied us throughout the trip and proved invaluable, always on hand to answer our questions and get things sorted. He also possessed an in-depth knowledge of Indian wildlife and in particular tiger conservation. Traveling by a combination of trains and road vehicles we visited three national parks, each a haven for wildlife: Bandhavgarh and Kanha in the "Tiger" state of Madhya Pradesh and Ranthambore in hot and dry Rajasthan. Game drives were at dawn and dusk and were in small vehicles that could seat 6 people; driver, guide, and up to 4 visitors. In addition, we also managed an early morning visit to the beautiful man-made symbol of love, the Taj Mahal near the city of Agra.

Our first stop was Bandhavgarh national park, 17 hours south east of Delhi by sleeper train, in the rural heart of India and relatively unknown to tourists. Formerly the hunting reserve of a maharaja, the park is dominated by the ancient ruins of Bandhavgarh fort, located high on a plateau. Much of the area is covered by Sal forest, a hardwood, replaced by mixed forests on the higher slopes of the hills, and there are also expanses of bamboo and grassland.

Bandhavgarh National Park

Our first full day proved to be a memorable one. As we approached a bend in the track Bunty pointed a short distance to our left to a sandy coloured, fox-like canid in the long grass. It was in fact a dhole or Indian wild dog, extremely scarce and usually a pack animal. As we rounded the bend in the track there indeed was the rest of the pack, feeding on a fresh chital (spotted deer) carcass. We watched for a few minutes and then to our astonishment one of the adults moved to one side and began to regurgitate food for a litter of young pups which dashed out from the undergrowth. With some reluctance we eventually moved on and left them to finish their meal.

Later that same morning we had our first meeting with the "stripey gentleman", the first of 7 wild tiger sightings during the trip.

As we crossed a small stream we saw a large male tiger standing behind a thin bush.

We simply could not believe our eyes; the rich orange colour and black stripes, the white patches behind the ears, the sheer size and muscular power of the animal. As we stood transfixed he turned and slowly made his way to the stream where he sat "sphinx like" in the flowing water.

Eventually, he got up and vanished without trace into the tall bankside vegetation. Everyone breathed for what seemed like the first time in 15 minutes.

That evening, as the light was beginning to fade, several vehicles were positioned along a track at intervals, engines turned off and their occupants sitting quietly and listening to the noise of something making its way through the thick undergrowth of the forest. Then emerged the huge frame of a sloth bear ambling across the track and disappearing into the forest on the other side.

Despite its huge size the sloth bear is essentially a termite eater with powerful front claws for ripping into the concrete hard termite mounds. It also has a gap in its upper front teeth through which it "hoovers" up the termites.

Sloth Bear

We then had to beat a hasty retreat in order to get out of the park before nightfall. That evening in the bar we had plenty to talk about, dhole, tiger and sloth bear all in one day!

* * *

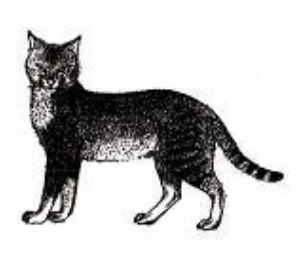
Kanha was a six hour "bone jarring" drive south west from Bandhavgarh along a thin, pot-holed ribbon of tarmac. However, it was well worth the effort. I was struck by how many people we saw, for there appeared to be someone working in almost every field! Along the way I glimpsed a small brown "squirrel-like" mammal with a bushy tail making its way along an embankment beside the road. I was pretty certain of the species because I'd seen one before, during a visit to London zoo in 2004. It was a tree shrew!

Kanha was the setting for "The Jungle Book" by Rudyard Kipling and is one of the largest reserves in India. It is made up of a crescent of hills that border meadows which are often cloaked in mist, particularly at dawn.

Kanha National Park

Several days into our trip now and the next few days provided some interesting contrasts. The period commenced with field signs and fleeting glimpses of animals and as time went on yielded some longer lasting encounters.

It started with a brief glimpse of a jungle cat slowly making its way through some tall grasses. Its pelage perfectly matched its environment and within the blink of an eye it had disappeared.



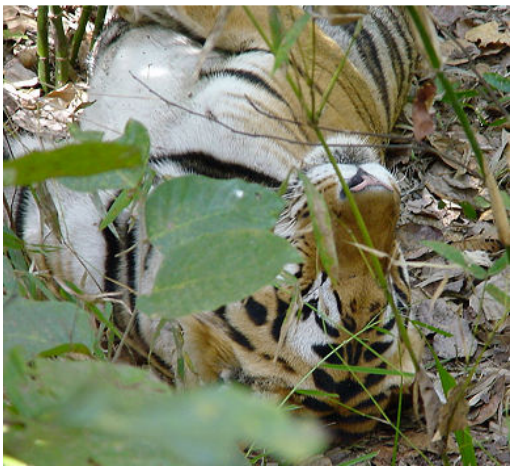
Next a tigress with three very young cubs crossed the track ahead of us. Two of the cubs went in front of the tigress but one, as usual, lagged behind. The tigress paused, looked back over her shoulder at the wayward cub and waited until it had rejoined the family group. The whole event lasted for just a few minutes but the images were clear and vivid.

Tiger pug marks

We were also shown tiger footprints (pug marks) and deep tiger scratch marks on territorial marker trees. The higher the scratch marks the larger and more dominant the individual that made them!

Then things began to change and each observation seemed to last for a longer period of time. As our vehicle drew to a standstill one afternoon, we looked out from our vantage point overlooking a water hole. A male tiger was lying on the ground sunbathing at the waters edge. Binoculars enabled us to pick out fine details and as we watched he sporadically raised a huge paw to swat nuisance insects. Eventually, the pests won the day and he got to his feet and ambled towards the pool. He turned and reversed into the water until it supported his huge body and then he swam out of our line of sight.

Sunday 13th was my birthday - during an elephant ride we enjoyed some of the closest encounters with tigers of the whole trip.



By dusk we were looking forward to a celebratory meal as we headed out of the park on our way back to the lodge. A short distance ahead we could see a group of vehicles haphazardly parked across the tree-lined track and our immediate thoughts were that there had been some sort of accident. However, as we drew closer Bunty whispered "leopard" and our hearts began to race. As our vehicle drew to a halt we peered through a gap in the trees to see a leopard lying on a rock in a small clearing illuminated by the last remaining rays of sunlight. We had a superb view of its pelage, especially the large black spots on its pale underside. What a birthday present, our very first sighting of the elusive leopard.

* * *

Another long overnight train journey, this time returning north west, to the city of Agra. During the journey we took the opportunity to discuss tiger conservation issues with Bunty. What does the future hold for the endangered tiger and will it be able to survive the twin pressures of poaching and human encroachment?

* * *

After a brief (but memorable) stop at the Taj Mahal, we continued our expedition and moved on to Ranthambore, just a short train ride away.

The park is encircled by a series of high escarpments and, like Bandhavgarh, is dominated by the ruins of an old fort. However, the forests, lakes and dry scrub that make up the area are dotted with old monuments and temples creating a unique atmosphere. In particular, many mammals and birds congregate at the lakes which are stunning, they are also home to marsh crocodiles.

Ranthambore National Park

Immediately upon entering the park one afternoon we witnessed a real 'life and death' struggle. A young Indian hare had been caught in the open and was under attack from a shikra, a

small "kestrel-like" raptor. After several near misses the hare took refuge beneath a thorny shrub, whist the shikra took up sentry duty from a branch overlooking the young hare. The stand off was still in progress as we moved on.

Several new species were encountered at Ranthambore, in particular the large solitary ruddy mongoose with characteristic red face and black tipped tail.

Ruddy Mongoose

In addition, the bizarre nilgai, also known as the blue bull, a large antelope with "horse like" head and movement, white fetlocks and steel blue colouration in the adult males.

Female Nilgai

* * *

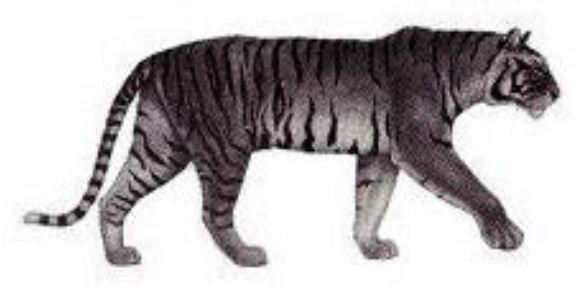
As we arrived back in the UK we reflected with quiet satisfaction our Indian safari. We had embarked upon 17 game drives, enjoyed 2 elephant rides and observed 7 wild tigers during our 12 days away. After much head scratching we both agreed that our favourite place of the trip was Kanha with it's misty meadows, closely followed by the magical lakes of Ranthambore and the impressive Taj Mahal. Species of the trip had to be the elusive leopard, lying on a rock at dusk, but our overall "magic moment" was the tiger sunbathing and swimming at the water hole.

So many memories to treasure until we can return to India and continue our search for more Royal Bengal tigers.

Photographs by Steve Docker
Line drawings courtesy of Indian Adventures

**Mammal Species List:**

tiger (*Panthera tigris*)
leopard (*Panthera pardus*)
jungle cat (*Felis chaus*)
dhole (Indian wild dog), (*Cuon alpinus*)
golden jackal (*Canis aureus*)
sloth bear (*Melursus ursinus*)
ruddy mongoose (*Herpestes smithii*)
rhesus macaque (*Macaca mulatta*)
common (hanuman) langur
(*Semnopithecus entellus*)
gaur (Indian bison), (*Bos guarus*)
sambar (*Cervus unicolor*)
barasingha (swamp deer), (*Cervus duvaucelii*)
chital (spotted deer), (*Axis axis*)
chincara (Indian gazelle), (*Gazella bennetti*)
nilgai (blue bull), (*Boselaphus tragocamelus*)
Indian wild boar (*Sus scrofa*)
flying fox (*Pteropus giganteus*)
tree shrew (*Anathana ellioti*)
five-striped palm squirrel
(*Funambulus pennantii*)
Indian hare (*Lepus nigricollis*)
(20 species)



## THE TIGER

Tiger tell us what to do
For all the world's in love with you
I look inside the chasm of your eyes
But we all know, you don't tell lies.

We all know what path to take
To save the soul of thy namesake
And yet, for thy fervent power
Disgrace thee, and your parts devour.

Tiger, Tiger, lithesome strength
An enemy of the human stench
When you've gone, what a shock
Another nail in the coffin clock.

Tiger, Tiger, Tiger be
All the things, you mean to me
But blind are those that
Don't want to see.

Symbolistic in your pure trait
The space you need, and man can't wait
Can't we supply the human race
A little time and precious space.

John Keeling