



Derbyshire Mammal Group

News

Spring
2004
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Annual Membership £5

The Derbyshire Mammal Group
is affiliated to
The Mammal Society



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Derbyshire Polecats

Dave Mallon

The first confirmed occurrence of the polecat (*Mustela putorius*) in Derbyshire since 1900 was of an animal killed on the road near Church Broughton on 27th June 1993. Details, and a synopsis of records of its status in the county during the 19th century are contained in an article by Nick Moyes in DNHS Observations, 1994, and subsequently reproduced on the DBRC website. Other polecats have been found since.

The first Peak District record appears to be a freshly-killed specimen found on the A6 north of Buxton on 13th September 1998 by Helen Perkins and Dave Mallon. Another was caught in a rat trap at Tideswell on 4th October 1998. Another road casualty turned up just north of Hayfield in April 1999. Photographs were sent to Dr Johnny Birks of the Vincent Wildlife Trust who confirmed that all appeared to be polecat, not polecat-ferret. A fourth specimen from Stoney Middleton Dale in 2001 showed some intermediate characters.

Typical polecat characters to look for are: very dark tail and rump, with no silvery guard hairs; dark face from forehead to rhinarium (naked area surrounding the nostrils); a small white chin; no white on the feet; no grizzling on the head.



Polecat
by Julian Jones

For more on polecats see centre page special!

Editorial

Polecats take centre stage for this issue with the announcement of a new polecat distribution survey and a keynote article by Johnny Birks of the Vincent Wildlife Trust. This issue also includes features on lagomorphs, a particular thanks to Derek Yalden (president of the Mammal Society) for his article on mountain hares and something different from Debbie Court (hedgehogs) and Laura Berkeley who brings us up to date with her 2003 African adventure. A big thanks to all those who contributed to this issue.

DMG elected posts were agreed at a group meeting held at the Whistlestop Countryside Centre on 10th November 2003, see front cover for details and Helen Perkins has been busy putting together an action packed programme for members that should keep the group very busy this year.

Steve Docker

DMG News On-line

Please note that you can now access DMG News on-line and/or download portable document format (pdf) versions from the group's website at:

www.derbyshiremammalgroup.com

To obtain your copy of DMG News on-line or in pdf you will need a modem, a suitable website browser and Adobe® Reader® software (available free, details at www.adobe.com). Please note that some issues of DMG News are quite large and may take up to 10 minutes to download on a standard 56 kbps dial-up connection.

DMG Membership

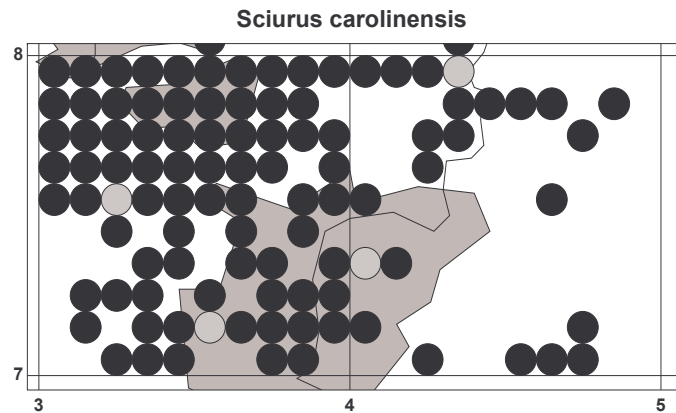
At the committee meeting on 10th November 2003 group members agreed a membership fee of £5 per household, per calendar year. If you wish to join the Derbyshire Mammal Group, please complete a membership form and forward it, with a cheque for £5 payable to 'Derbyshire Mammal Group', to the Treasurer, Steve Lonsdale.

Mammals in the Dronfield Area

Derek Whiteley

We have just received a total of 2933 mammal records from the Dronfield and District Natural History Society (DDNHS) covering the ten kilometre squares SK37 and SK47. They span the period 1978 to the present day, and have already been computerised in RECORDER 3.3 by Norman and Barbara Best. The export/import process to the DMG database took less than 60 seconds.

The one kilometre dot map for grey squirrel (*Sciurus carolinensis*) illustrates how well the area has been recorded.



Solid dots are post 1980 records within the relevant square. The pale shading represents urban areas of Chesterfield and Dronfield and the wavy line is the River Rother. Now, if we can get the rest of the county to this intensity we will be doing well! Our thanks go to DDNHS for allowing us to use their records. We also acknowledge Alan Morton's DMAP software for producing the map.

Grey Squirrel
Courtesy of English Nature



Mountain Hares

by Derek Yalden, president of The Mammal Society

DMG members will know about, may well have participated in, the re-survey of mountain hares (*Lepus timidus*) in the Peak District over the winter Jan to Mar 2000. This was organised, and then written up, by David Mallon (Mallon 2001 *The Mountain Hare in the Peak District*, Derbyshire Wildlife Trust). The hare was found in 332 1-km squares, an increase of 35% over the range I reported in 1984. It prompted a major question, though, about the size of the population. On any walk, only a proportion of ground is covered, and the 944 hares counted were only a proportion of hares sighted. So how good is the effort, and what extrapolation is needed to get a full estimate of the population? There are good statistical models, known as DISTANCE sampling, to attempt an answer. Taking a random selection of 100 of the 1-km squares in which the 2000 survey found hares, balanced to cover heather, grass and cotton-grass squares, Philip Wheeler and I re-surveyed the Peak District in winter 2001-2002. We walked a total of 280 km of transect between us - as a PhD student, he did his 50 squares mid-week, and I did mine at weekends. We walked straight lines just inside the boundary of each square, not only counting hares but also recording their perpendicular distance from our transects.

The trouble is that mountain hares come in two behavioural classes. Some are visible at, on average, 98m away (up to 600m or more away, in fact), so are being counted in a strip nearly 200m wide. About half the hares we saw were in this group. Extrapolating from them suggested a population of about 2000, not too far off what Mallon suggested from the 2000 survey. However, there is the other group, those that get up under your feet from, on average, only 9m away. The other half of the hares were in this narrow band, so obviously at about 10 times the density of the distantly sighted hares. As a consequence, we think the mountain hare population is around 10,000.

However, the regular walks undertaken each March by the Sorby Natural History Society show that numbers were very much lower in the mid-1980s, as a result probably of severe winters, and the numbers have certainly increased since then with the very mild winters now typical. Though a population of 10,000 seems safe, it could easily decline.

The population is fragmented by deep valleys and roads. From February to August, on weekly visits, I collected the remains of 45 from the Snake Road. That seems a severe toll, perhaps 20% of the adult hares living in the adjacent squares, and we need to work out just how important the threats of wider, busier roads might be. Since we think we have a good idea of the overall range and population size, and can get figures for reproductive rate from the literature, we hope to be able to answer this question shortly. Watch this space, and watch out for an idiot naturalist scraping hares off the Snake Road.



Mountain Hare
by Laura Berkeley

More on Mountain Hares.....

There is more on mountain hares in the Dec 2003 issue of the "British Wildlife" journal. "Mountain hares in the Peak District" by Mallon, D., Wheeler, P., Whiteley, D. and Yalden, D. W. is on pages 110 to 116.

Studying Mammals

Steve Docker

"Studying Mammals" is a new science short course offered by the Open University that is based upon the TV series and book "The Life of Mammals" by Sir David Attenborough. It provides the opportunity to learn about a diverse range of mammals at a level beyond that possible from watching the TV series alone. I've just completed the second presentation of this distance learning course (the OU run four courses per year) and it made me realise how much (or should I say how little) information is taken in when watching TV in a casual way with all the usual distractions.

This course offers a more structured approach and provides a rich array of study materials including "The Life of Mammals" book and TV programmes (on DVD), a specially written course text and study guide and a computer based course conference and website. It consists of 10 study periods. SP1 provides a general introduction to the class mammalia and includes information on monotremes and marsupials. The rest of the course deals with placental mammals. SP's 2 to 6 are diet based covering the specialist feeders such as insect eaters and carnivores and the more generalist feeders, the omnivores. Study periods 7 to 10 are more habitat based covering aquatic mammals, the tree dwellers and finally the primates including us humans. Scientific and biological principles are introduced as they are needed and adaptations and the versatility of mammals are a common theme of the course.

The course takes between 2 and 5 months to complete (I took 5 months) and I found the second half of the course to be more of a challenge than the first half. It may have been me but there appeared to be more material and more difficult concepts towards the end. At £95 I would highly recommend this course to any mammal enthusiast.

Further details on "S182 Studying Mammals" may be found at www.open.ac.uk/science/short.

Big Mammals in Kenya

Laura Berkeley

In Sep 2003, I flew off to Kenya to see some BIG mammals. I had booked a ten-day safari in tented accommodation at Duma camp, a small site just outside the Masai Mara reserve, famous for the annual migration of the wildebeest and zebra herds.

Due to the terrorist threats, tourism has been hit badly in Kenya. As a result I discovered I was to be the only client at the camp, giving me the luxury of being pampered by the Maasai staff and a game driver and vehicle all to myself. The Masai Mara reserve is not fenced in so wild animals such as lion and elephant do have the freedom to wander through the camp. This happened mostly at night when hippos would leave the nearby river to graze around the tents, snorting in harmony with the roars of the nearby lions. One night I woke up to the reverberating rumbles of a bull elephant outside my tent and with only a thin bit of canvass between us, I did not get much sleep!

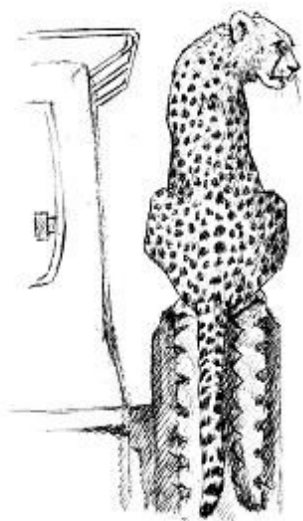
The daily routine began at 6.30 am with a three hour game drive. This was the best time to see the animals before the heat of the day set in. After breakfast, I was taken for a walk by the Maasai either along the riverbanks to view the hippos, or across the plains where I walked amongst the grazing animals, with the hope that the lions were sleeping elsewhere! I then had lunch and a rest before another game drive that lasted until dusk at 6.45 pm.

On two occasions, I had a full day out. One to attend a Maasai wedding followed by a drive to Leopard Gorge. Unfortunately, I did not see a leopard but had a close encounter with a bull elephant, which finally went to sleep with his massive bulk leaning against a tree. The other full day was a drive to the Mara River to see the famous wildebeest crossing. On our way we came across Jonathan Scott and his wife Angie from Big Cat Diary, filming a female cheetah called Kike and her three cubs. We parked next to their vehicle and enjoyed close views as the cheetahs climbed over the bonnets and spare tyres. I was delighted to see this on the Big Cat Diary programme on BBC1.

When I arrived at the banks of the Mara river, the immense drama of the wildebeest crossing was starting to unfold. Thousands of wildebeest and zebra dotted the landscape, hesitant in making the crossing. Eventually, a single wildebeest took to the water which triggered the stampede of bodies,

sliding and falling down the bank into the river. As they staggered up the bank to where we were, a creation of gold flashed past our vehicle as a lone lioness went in for the kill. Everything happened at such speed that it took me a while to comprehend that I had witnessed the raw, often brutal side of nature. Although this was a quick and clean kill, I was glad it was the only kill I was to see, as the migration does draw in the predators. Driving back from the Mara river, we once again met the Big Cat Diary crew (they seemed to be everywhere!), this time filming the Marsh lions. It was a beautiful scene with the lionesses strolling around completely oblivious to the vehicles, and fourteen well fed cubs bouncing around Simba, the dominant lion of the pride, again seen on Big Cat Diary.

I was very fortunate to have very close views of lion prides and elephant herds. Giraffes, gazelles, antelopes, zebra and buffalo were in abundance. I also had frequent sightings of cheetah, the most memorable being a female with five ten-day old kittens.



Young cheetah on Big Cat Diary vehicle
by Laura Berkeley

Simba, dominant male to
Marsh Pride
by Laura Berkeley



I have been asked to identify a species of the trip, a place of the trip and a magic moment. Having spent time amongst the elephant herds and a night with one outside my tent, I have to say that these are at the top of my species list. The place of the trip has to be the Mara river with the wildebeest crossing and the magic moment came on my last day in Kenya, when I met Daphne Sheldrick.

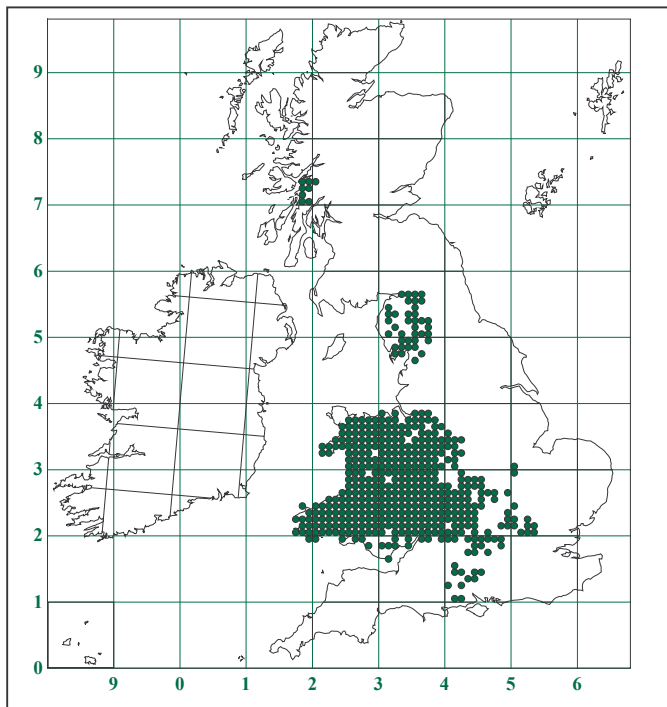
Daphne is famous for her pioneering work in rescuing and rehabilitating orphaned elephants and rhinos back into the wild. At her home in Nairobi Park, I had a very special meeting with six baby elephants that were being cared for by her staff, sad victims of the poaching. To have my hand suckled by a baby elephant was a very touching and moving experience. When these baby elephants are big enough, they will be integrated into a much larger herd of adolescent and adult elephants at Tsavo National Park. These elephants had also been orphaned and raised by Daphne. I have been invited back to Kenya to visit this herd in Tsavo and to spend more time with the elephants. I am saving my pennies so that I can do this all over again.

List of mammals sighted – baboon, black backed jackal, Burchell’s zebra, bush buck, Cape buffalo, cheetah, common reed buck, common water buck, dikdik, eland, elephant, giraffe, Grant’s gazelle, hartebeest, hippopotamus, impala, lion, mongoose, rhinoceros, rock hyrax, spotted hyena, Thompson’s gazelle, topi, warthog and wildebeest.

Pick up a Polecat!

by Johnny Birks of The Vincent Wildlife Trust

A new three-year distribution survey run jointly by The Mammal Society and The Vincent Wildlife Trust (VWT) aims to track the polecat's (*Mustela putorius*) continuing range expansion in Britain. As with the last one (carried out by the VWT in the mid-1990s) the 2004-2006 survey will mainly involve the collection of bodies recovered as road casualties; as ever it will depend heavily upon the efforts of local naturalists prepared to pick up and pass on specimens. Because of the presence of feral ferrets and polecat-ferret hybrids, the bodies of specimens (or good photos of them) are needed to confirm the identity of any animals collected. Indeed the survey is keen to learn about the presence of any feral ferret populations on the mainland of Britain as well as mapping the distribution of true polecats.



The 473 10km squares in which polecats were recorded between 1959 and 1997
(map from Birks & Kitchener, 1999)

After centuries of mistreatment and persecution by humans, culminating in a close brush with extinction in the early 1900s, things are finally looking up for the polecat in Britain. The last survey report (152 glossy, fact-packed pages - published in 1999 and still available from the VWT for £8.00 including p&p!)



Polecat
by Laura Berkeley

confirms a continuing steady eastward expansion of the polecat's range into the English midlands. Importantly it notes the polecat's return to Derbyshire after an absence of nearly a hundred years, heralded by a specimen recovered as a road casualty near Church Broughton in 1993 (now preserved in Derby City Museum). Since then several more Derbyshire specimens have been recovered, suggesting that the county is being actively recolonised by a native mammal believed to have been trapped out in about 1900.

The reasons for the polecat's encouraging recovery are probably two-fold: firstly, trapping pressure has been greatly reduced since the heyday of the British sporting estate when huge numbers of gamekeepers were employed to keep all predators in check; secondly, the polecat's main prey species, the rabbit, has increased as the initially devastating effect of myxomatosis on rabbit populations has waned. Consequently (and there are clear parallels with the buzzard's recovery), reduced persecution and healthy prey populations have enabled the polecat to repopulate even the most intensively farmed lowlands. However, this recovery is not entirely problem-free. The polecat's age-old tendency to prey on farmyard rats in winter has exposed it to the dangers of modern rodent control. Analyses of the livers of polecats from the 1990s revealed that 40% of animals run over in the spring carried a detectable burden of anticoagulant rodenticides (of course this 'sub-lethal' sample excludes the unknown proportion of animals that had already died as a result of lethal levels of rodenticide contamination). Conscious that polecats are spreading eastward towards the main grain-growing areas where rodenticide use is heaviest, we are keen to use specimens from the new survey to reassess the extent of exposure.

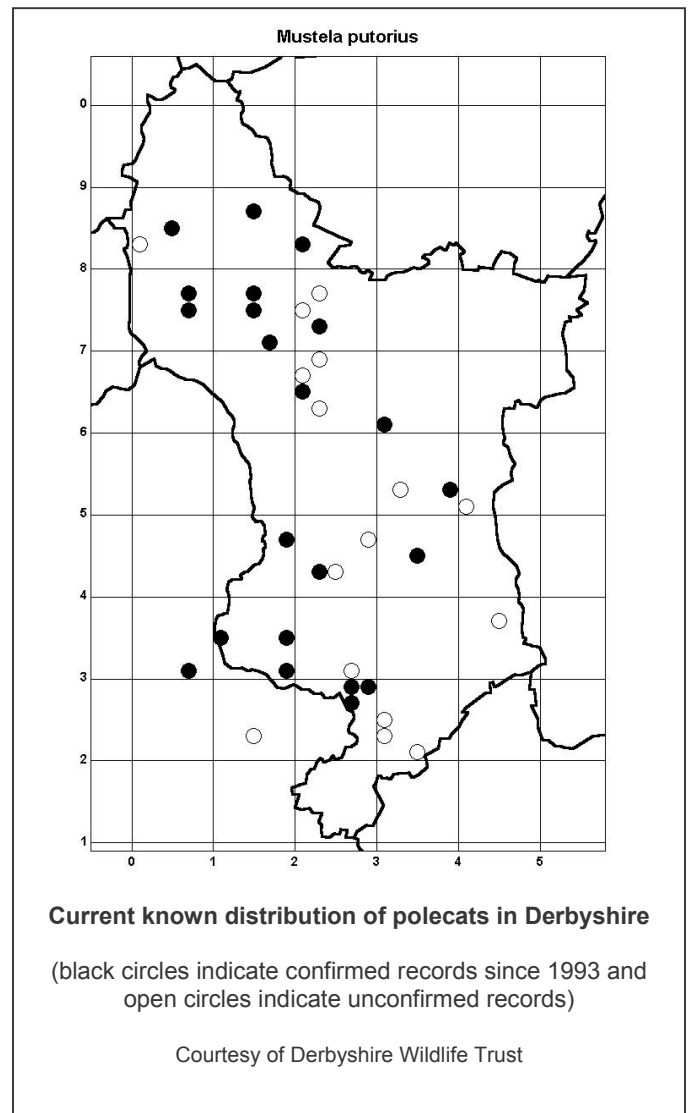
With Derbyshire apparently situated strategically on the very edge of the polecat's British range, we are very keen to promote recording within the county so as to map the limits of distribution during the survey window. Most records tend to occur as road casualties and this probably reflects the polecat's tendency to forage along roadsides at night in search of fresh carrion, making it vulnerable to collision with vehicles. If you see a polecat (or ferret hybrid) dead on the road, please do the following:

- Park your vehicle carefully so as not to compromise your safety nor that of other road users
- Collect the specimen, seal it in a plastic bag and keep it cool (ideally deep frozen)
- 'Phone the VWT on 01531 636441 for instructions (you will probably be asked to post it in packaging supplied by the VWT)
- Record the date and grid reference and keep these details with the body along with your name
- Please also remember to supply details of the record to Philip Precey at the Derbyshire Wildlife Trust.

A free leaflet on the polecat and on how to tell polecats and ferrets apart are available from the VWT if you send us two first class stamps.

The VWT, 3 & 4 Bronsil Courtyard, Eastnor, Ledbury, Herefordshire HR8 1EP. 01531 636441.

Email: vwt@vwt.org.uk Website: www.vwt.org.uk



Polecat
by Denys Ovenden

The Humble Hedgehog

Debbie Court

The hedgehog (*Erinaceus europaeus*) is one of Britain's most recognisable mammals. Its spiny appearance is unmistakable and, if you have ever tried to pick one up with bare hands, unforgettable!

The hedgehog is much beloved in our culture and in our formative years. Who can forget the adorable Mrs Tiggy-Winkle in the Beatrix Potter stories or Fuzzypeg in Alison Uttley's stories of Little Grey Rabbit?

As a child I remember my Dad bringing home a young hedgehog as the only survivor of a road accident, his mother and siblings had been squashed (not my Dad's fault as he cycled to work!). I was fascinated by his little habitats including his snuffling and his spines. I made him a little shelter in the garden and drip-fed him water through a tiny waterbottle. 'Hedge' (as I rather originally called him after one of the characters in a children's TV programme) was not a particularly welcome house-guest as his fleas got everywhere and when I tried to weigh him, he made a bit of a mess on my Mum's scales!

Hedgehogs are one of only a few British mammals that truly hibernate. Hibernation usually begins in October or November when the mammal starts to drift into a sort of suspended animation where it stops moving, stops breathing for long periods of time, its heart rate drops to around 20 beats per minute and it becomes cold to the touch.

Breeding starts soon after the hedgehog wakes up in spring. Hedgehogs do not mate for life, they just come together once and a male may mate with many females during his lifetime. As most mating takes place during the dark not many people have had the pleasure of seeing this in action. However they do make a huge amount of noise as the pair circle each other for anything up to an hour snorting all the time. They come together only when the female is ready. She has to adopt a strange flat position so the male will not injure himself in the act!! The young, usually 4 or 5, are born in a nest which the mother has built specifically for the purpose. Babies are bald and have their eyes shut. But within hours the first white spines can begin to grow through the skin. The eyes will open after about 10 hours.

After about a month the mother will take them out on feeding trips then only a couple of weeks later the young move out to survive on their own. About a fifth of all baby hedgehogs do not live to be able to leave the nest.

A hedgehog's diet consists of beetles, caterpillars, earthworms, small mammals, slugs and rather controversially some birds' eggs.



Hedgehog courtesy of English Nature

Hedgehogs spend most of their day sleeping and tend to wake up only when it gets dark. If you see a hedgehog during the day it can often signify a problem. During the night male hedgehogs can travel up to 3km from their home and enter a number of female territories. They are not particularly fussy where they go, but will return to any reliable source of food. They do not mark their territories in any particular way but they do leave a faint scent trail as their underside brushes against the ground. Females, however, are less adventurous and only travel about 1km a night to find food for themselves and their young. Hedgehogs can swim but they tire easily and can often drown in a pond or pool with no easy way of escape. One strange and as yet still not properly explained habit the hedgehog has, is 'self-anointing' or licking their bodies with frothy saliva. It is possible that this is to ward off fleas or to deter potential predators.

In 1997 Nick Moyes and colleagues from the Derby City Museum undertook a Derby City Hedgehog survey. Full survey results can be viewed at the Derbyshire Biological Record Centre website www.dbrc.freemove.co.uk/mammals.

In summary a total of 248 completed City Hedgehog Survey Forms were received from 200 people in Derby. (This represented 190 separate addresses as some families returned more than one form). Over 300 individual hedgehog records were received, most of which were from within the City area. Hedgehogs were reported from most populated parts of the City, especially Allestree, Chaddesden, Darley Abbey, Littleover, Mickleover, Normanton, Oakwood, Sinfin and Spondon. Hedgehogs have also been seen right inside the City Centre on Sowter Road by Derby Industrial Museum, and on St Alkmund's Way. Out of 97 separate one kilometre map squares (1km²) partly or wholly in Derby, there are records from 58 of them directly as a result of this survey. There are 55 kilometre squares wholly falling within the City from which hedgehogs have now been recorded in 37 of them since the 1997 survey began. By the end of 1999, 233 post-1997 hedgehog records from Derby, from an all-time total of 298.

You might also like to look at the hedgehog distribution map for the Sorby area 1970-1997 and 1980-2000 on the Sorby Natural History Society website www.shu.ac.uk/city/community/sorby. Where the hedgehog is noted as being particularly common in the suburban areas of Sheffield, Rotherham, Chesterfield, Dronfield and Stocksbridge. There are few records from high moorland. The line of the high gritstone edges to the west of Sheffield can be clearly seen as a gap on the map between the suburbs of Sheffield and the valleys of the Peak District illustrating the preference for lower altitudes. It is not common in the White Peak.

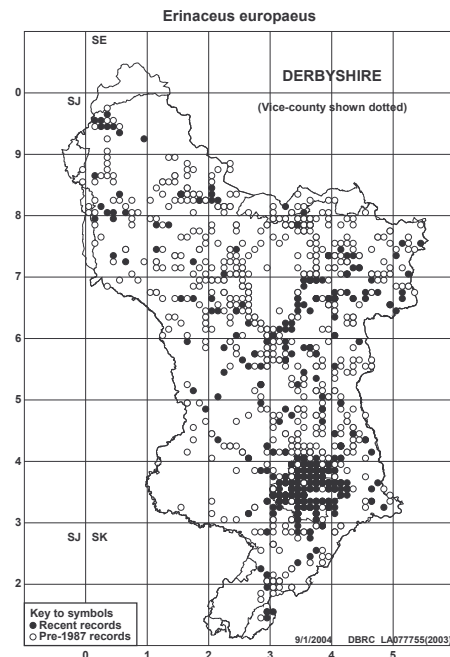
So if you have any Derbyshire hedgehog records, no matter how old they are, please send them to Derek Whiteley (and they will then be copied to DBRC on an annual basis).

Further reading:

- Morris, P. (1983) *Hedgehogs*. Whittet Books
 Morris, P. A. (1994) *The Hedgehog*. The Mammal Society
 Reeve, N. (1994) *Hedgehogs*. T & AD Poyser Ltd
 Sedgley, J. (1991) *Hedgehogs in your garden?* The Mammal Society

Websites:

- Hedgehog lifecycle and ecology: www.steveconrad.co.uk/hog
- The hedgehog Helpline website: www.hedgehg.dircon.co.uk/hedgehogs.
- A one-stop shop for hedgehog lovers everywhere including toys for hedgehogs (yes!) www.Hedgehogcentral.com.
- Beds and Herts Hedgehog Rescue website includes some amusing poems www.hedgehog-rescue.co.uk



Hedgehog Records courtesy of DBRC

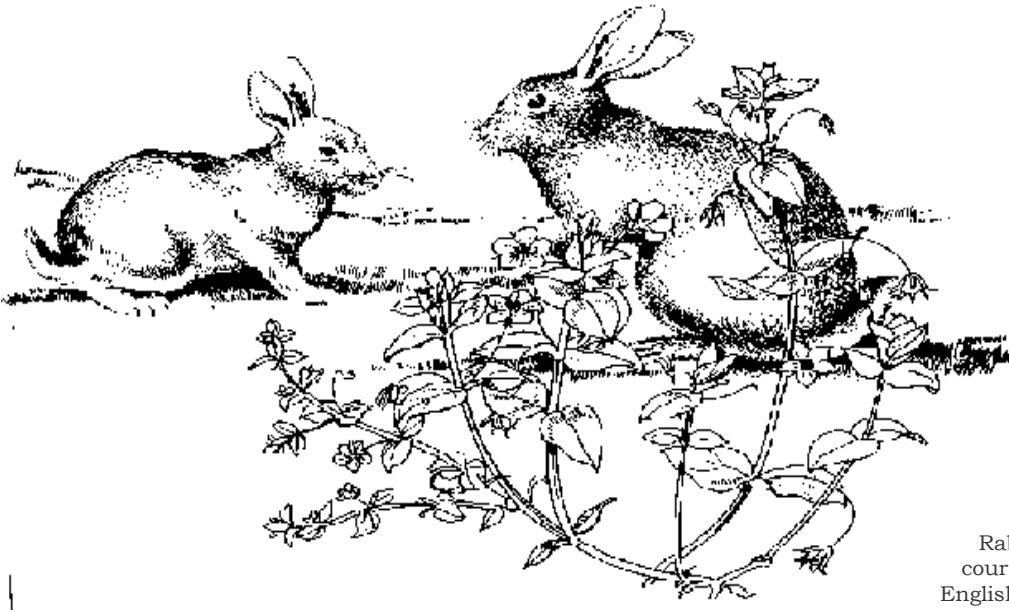
The hedgehog

by John Clare (1793-1864)

The hedgehog hides beneath the rotten hedge
 And makes a great round nest of grass and sedge,
 Or in a bush or hollow of a tree;
 And many often stoop and say they see
 Him roll and fill his prickles full of crabs
 And creep away; and where the magpie dabs
 His wing at muddy dyke, in aged root
 He makes a nest and fills it full of fruit,
 On the hedge-bottom hunts for crabs and sloes
 And whistles like a cricket as he goes.
 It rolls up like a ball or shapeless hogs
 When gypsies hunt it with their noisy dog
 I've seen it in their camps - they call it sweet,
 Though black and bitter and unsavoury meat.

Black and White Rabbits in Derbyshire!

Derek Whiteley



Rabbits
courtesy of
English Nature

Black Rabbits

It is always worth recording the presence of black rabbits in wild populations. I first noticed them in the White Peak in 1972. In 1975 a count of 50 rabbits (*Oryctolagus cuniculus*) at Haddon Fields included 9 black specimens. In 1976 I published a preliminary distribution map of black rabbits which showed a widespread scatter of records. More recently for an evening count of about 200 rabbits in a small area of Monsal Dale the incidence of black specimens was exactly 10%.

From casual observations their behaviour seems no different from normal-coloured rabbits with which they mix quite freely. Has anyone noticed any difference?

Black rabbits are certainly frequent in the White Peak, but it would be interesting to get an overall picture for the county. Do let me know if you see any, and if you can estimate the ratio of black : wild type, then it becomes more interesting.

and White Rabbits

A few years ago I went with a group of people to watch mountain hares (*Lepus timidus*) in their brown summer pelage in a circular walk along footpaths taking in Lost Lad, Green Sitches, and Derwent Edge. Altogether 16 mountain hares were seen. Towards the end of the walk a large white lagomorph with pinkish ears was seen below Derwent Edge at SK196886 at an altitude of 410m in moorland vegetation and not far from our last hare sighting. We observed it very briefly from about 100 metres then it disappeared. Our immediate thoughts were that it was an albino mountain hare. I returned the next day, alone, to the same place and (to my disappointment) discovered that it was a white rabbit (*Oryctolagus cuniculus*). It was timid and as I approached it disappeared into thick bracken cover. After a short search I found a rabbit burrow in the bracken thicket typically marked with droppings. Further searches found more evidence of rabbits on the moorland edge about 100 metres away.

Recorder's Report

Derek Whiteley

Records have been coming in thick and fast. Since my last report I have received three large batches – from Steve and Liz Lonsdale (an impressive 542 records!), from Derek Yalden (several hundred records for 1997-2000 on BIOBASE), and several hundred records for 2002/3 from the Sorby Natural History Society Mammal Group, sent by the Recorder, Val Clinging. I have also added a further 500 records from my field notebooks.

Philip Precey has sent 108 records for 2003, and contributions also from Ian and Sue Weatherly, Mike Ashford, Tony Taylor, Sue Crookes, Shirley Cross, Eileen Thorpe, Steve Price, Debbie Court and Sarah Whiteley.

Records are being entered into the Group's RECORDER database, and paper copies are stored in a big file. Those of you who send records by e-mail may like to know that I print off a hard copy on paper and these are filed too. So there is plenty to keep me busy, but keep those records coming.

The geographical bias is still to the north and Peak District, but the good news is that more records are coming in for the south and central areas (the Lonsdales and Philip Precey are making a big impact here). The south-west and far south are still patchy, even for common species, so bear this in mind when planning your 2004 field trips.

I have just sent an export disk of all our computerised records to Derbyshire Biological Records Centre and a print-out to the Sorby Mammal Recorder, Val Clinging, for the north of the county.

(situation at 12 January 2004)

National Owl Pellet Survey

Dave Mallon

This was launched by the Mammal Society in January 1993 and by the end of Apr 2002 a total of 25,269 owl pellets had been analysed, yielding 89,836 prey items.



Field Vole
by Julian Jones



Wood Mouse
by Laura Berkeley



Common Shrew
courtesy of DWT

More than three quarters of the prey consisted of three species: field vole, wood mouse and common shrew, and small mammals made up 97% of all prey. So far, 18 mammals (including weasel and 4 bat species) plus a few birds, reptiles and amphibians have been recorded as prey items. The survey is ongoing and help is still needed, in the form of batches of owl pellets or the results of pellet analysis.

Analysing owl pellets is an excellent way of getting to know how to identify small mammals from bone fragments. It is also a useful method of establishing which small mammals occur in a particular area, though it doesn't provide a precise locality. Regular sampling of pellet sites throughout the year can show up seasonal changes in prey availability. Larger scale studies such as the national survey can provide comparative data on the prey preferences of different owl species.

Pellet analysis also provides the possibility of discovering some interesting local information. For instance, examination of long-eared owl pellets from the NW of the county, supported by subsequent direct observations, showed that a pair at one site preyed repeatedly on frogs, a relatively unusual occurrence.

Contact details: Send results of analysis (or batches of pellets) to R. A. Love, 4 Laurel Way, Totteridge, London N20 8HP. Details of the contents and comments will be sent to contributors.



Owl pellet with mammal remains from a cleaned pellet
courtesy of The Mammal Society

Polecat-ferret hybrid found near Whaley Bridge

Helen Perkins

One morning last September (2003) Derbyshire Wildlife Trust received a call from a member living in Furness Vale who was seeking advice relating to an injured animal she had found on the road the previous evening. Carol had spotted the creature by the side of the A5004. It appeared to have been clipped by a car. She placed the animal on the passenger seat of her car and drove it back to her home in Furness Vale. Fortunately it didn't come round during the journey! After speaking to Carol on the phone it became clear that the passenger had been a polecat or polecat-ferret. Dave Mallon and I visited Carol later that morning to see the animal and this was confirmed. It had recovered somewhat from its ordeal and certainly seemed to be behaving like a wild creature. It had already bitten Carol and made a lunge for me during our visit. Some of its features, such as its pale eyes and the extent of white on its throat suggested it was more ferret than polecat, but this was a young animal and we weren't absolutely sure. The Chestnut Centre kindly agreed to provide a bit of R & R for it over the next few days where the animal warden confirmed it as a polecat-ferret hybrid. It made a full recovery, but in consultation with the RSPCA, the Chestnut Centre decided to hand the animal over to the Stapeley Grange Animal Sanctuary in Cheshire rather than return it to the wild. It's difficult to know for certain whether this animal was from a population established in the wild or whether it was a recent escapee, though the former seems more likely given its behaviour.

What to do with polecat-ferret hybrids that might be encountered in this way or which might inadvertently be caught in live traps set for other animals such as mink, appears to be a growing issue. Johnny Birks' advice is that there are two criteria that should guide us on whether to release these animals back into the wild. Firstly their phenotype (how 'polecatty' they look) and secondly their behaviour (if they appear tame and docile they were probably not born in the wild so are better off back in captivity). However as Johnny has remarked, such judgements are somewhat subjective and influenced by the experience of the person involved. Where a decision might need to be made quickly, for example in the case of animals found in live traps set for mink, Johnny's advice is to release any polecat-like hybrids back into the wild unless they are very obviously tame ferrets. Vincent Wildlife Trust's new polecat survey will give us an insight into just how many of our road casualty polecats are actually polecat-ferret hybrids and may give us a better idea of their status in Derbyshire.

National Mammal Week
3rd to 11th July 2004

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Please send material, details of forthcoming events, comments etc to Steve Docker: Tel: 01335 348345 or email: steve@dock5.freeserve.co.uk

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