



Derbyshire Mammal Group

News Issue 25 Autumn/Winter 2014

Forthcoming Events:

14th December - Christmas Social, Carsington Water.

In 2015:

Small mammal trapping sessions

Harvest Mouse nest recording

Mammal recording sessions

Mountain hare walk

Mammal bones workshop

Christmas and Summer social events

Mammal Society Spring Conference – Lancaster
University 28/29th March

<http://www.mammal.org.uk/conference>

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Whale watching in Yorkshire

Whilst famous for many things our neighbouring county of Yorkshire is not widely known as a destination for whale watching. However a recent trip out of Whitby provided an experience every bit as good as I've had in the better known cetacean 'hotspots' such as Baja, Mexico or the Azores. My impression of the North Sea has always been of a shallow, relatively uninteresting body of water whose fish stocks and consequently other marine life had been severely depleted. Nothing it seems could be further from the truth. In recent years Minke whales have regularly been sighted off the Yorkshire coast, drawn to the area by shoals of spawning herring. Minke gather in sizeable numbers together with seals (mostly greys) and seabirds, particularly Gannets. The peak months for sightings of whales being August through to October.

Even on a mid-week day in September the town of Whitby is busy. Commercial boats plying their trade - offering a variety of excursions from short sightseeing trips to all day fishing expeditions. I'm looking for the 'Specksioneer' a 17m motor yacht operated by Whitby Whale Watching. Taking up to 12 passengers this sturdy boat offers a stable and roomy platform for whale watching, with indoor and outdoor areas. We are met by owner / skipper Bryan, before leaving harbour and heading out into the North Sea.

The herring shoals are highly mobile and can move several kilometres overnight. We head for the location where they were last seen - around 10km from the coast. Despite it being a calm day with only a gentle swell, an hour into the trip we've not seen any cetaceans, just a few Grey seals. Bryan decides to head south, following a course parallel to the coast. After another hour or so we begin to see more seals floating on the surface. Apparently this is often a precursor of whale activity in



Minke Whale.
Photo: Tim Stenton

these parts. Soon after, we sight our first whale, a Minke which surfaces maybe a kilometre away, its dark body breaking the surface. Compared to their larger cousins such as the Blue whale, Minke whales or specifically the Northern Minke (*Balaenoptera acutorostrata*), are

small, growing to around 9.5m and weighing 10 tonnes. Their blow is characteristically small and

invisible or indistinct. Travelling further we encounter feeding gannets and more seals and whales. There are hundreds of seals and we see at least 15 Minke - some close to our boat. Whilst we don't observe any lunge feeding on the surface the Gannets are clearly catching large herring. The whales are likely feeding on the same prey.

Individual Minke can be identified by distinct markings on their dorsal fin. These also vary both in terms of size and shape, though on some animals the markings are very subtle. One of the whales we see has a distinct kink near the top of its dorsal fin, another has a pronounced cut at the base probably from entanglement with fishing gear.



Minke with distinct fin.
Photo: Tim Stenton

As well as the Minke we are also keeping a lookout for a juvenile Humpback that been seen only the day before. Regular visitors to the coast they have been seen in September for several years running. Unfortunately we are unlucky as time runs out and we head back. Along the way encountering Puffins, in winter plumage with their black faces, as well as a Sooty shearwater.

It has been another good season for cetacean activity – the Humpback was re-sighted and Sei and Fin whales were also seen, together with White-beaked and Bottlenose dolphin. Not a bad haul for an area that I used to think offered limited cetacean watching opportunities. I shall certainly be going again.

Tim Stenton

The Mammals of Derbyshire - update

The mammal group has now sold 404 copies of 'The Mammals of Derbyshire'. It will continue to be sold at many DWT and other local natural history events over the coming months for £10.

If you wish to have a copy posted to you, please send a cheque (payable to 'Derbyshire Mammal Group') for £12.50 (includes P&P) and your full postal address to: Steve Lonsdale, 31 Caroline Close, Alvaston, Derby DE24 0QX

Steve Lonsdale

Rare Mammals

A DNHS member Brian Gough lent me a book called Nature Parade, which was first published in 1939. It quotes from earlier writings so some of the information seems a little odd by today's standards. One section is devoted to those animals which had not been exhibited in any British zoo, either because they were rare, difficult to catch or impossible to keep alive. I decided to see how these species had fared since then. Extracts from Nature Parade are in italics.

Chinese takin live in the inhospitable heights between South Shensi and the Tibetan border where heavy clouds and mists prevail for most of the day and the land is split up by a series of ravines. It is a ruminant midway between cattle and antelopes on the one hand and sheep and goats on the other with a full grown bull standing 5ft at the shoulder and weighing 600lbs.

Shortly after I read that I saw a takin on TV and noted all the points mentioned in a wiki article. They look a bit like musk oxen, but not so hairy. Short legs with large hooves support a stocky body with a deep chest. The head is large with a long arched nose and stout ridged horns that run parallel to the skull and then turn up in a short point. An oily, strong smelling substance is secreted over the whole body. This may account for the swollen appearance of the face which led George Schaller to liken it to a "bee-stung moose". Their appearance has also led to them being called cattle chamois or gnu goat. Four subspecies are recognised including the Shaanxi or golden takin whose lustrous coat may have inspired the legend of the golden fleece sought by Jason and the Argonauts. Takin are considered endangered in China and vulnerable by the IUCN.

Poli live on the plateau between Turkestan and the Pamirs, which, with a mean elevation of 17,000 feet is known as the roof of the World. They are large as sheep go – 4ft at shoulder with horns up to 75 inches which are so heavy that when lying down the sheep frequently rest them on the ground.

The poli is now referred to as the Marco Polo sheep and is a subspecies of argali. The horns are indeed impressive, the longest individual horn on record weighing 60lbs. They have been a popular attraction for trophy hunters since the 1950's when the King of Afghanistan shot a ram. The worldwide population is estimated as around 10,000.

Dibatag or Clarke's gazelle has a peculiar way of running, the long neck is thrown back and the tail thrown forward so that there appears to be only a foot between head and tail. In the opinion of the Midgan (the Somali hunting tribe) it is the wariest of antelope and very difficult to shoot.



Ammodorcas clarkeii still live in the sandy grasslands of Ethiopia and Somalia but there are only a few thousand individuals left with no captive population. It is listed as vulnerable to extinction. It does have a long, furry, black tail which is raised in flight. This gave rise to the name dibatag which means erect tail in Somali.

Kouprey or Indo-Chinese forest ox is similar to Gaur. At the time of its discovery in 1937 there were thought to be about 1000 animals.

Koupreys were found mainly in northern Cambodia. Thought to be related to both the aurochs and the gaur they are very large ungulates with tall narrow bodies, long legs and humped backs. Males can stand 6foot at the shoulder and weigh a ton. Numbers reduced due to uncontrolled hunting, diseases from cattle and loss of habitat. There are estimated to be less than 50 left in the world but none have been sighted since 1983 and several searches have proved fruitless, so it may already be extinct.

John Bland

DMG Web site

The Derbyshire Mammal Group web site will soon be undergoing some changes to the way it looks which should improve its appearance and functionality especially on the smaller screens of mobiles and tablets. At the moment, when viewed on a mobile device or smaller tablet, vertical and (frustratingly), horizontal scrolling is needed to see the full content of each page.

The new version will produce pages that adapt or respond to the size of screen and the device the viewer is using. There will be differences in how the pages look on different screens, but the content will remain the same. On mobile screens, there should be no more need to scroll horizontally to read pages and wide menu bars will become single buttons, to be expanded when needed.

Many websites have already changed to this type of design. The [People's Trust for Endangered Species](#) and [Mid Derbyshire Badger Group](#) are both examples of this. If you keep reducing the size of your browser window whilst viewing these, you can see how the layout changes. Or you could compare the sites side by side on, say, a laptop and a smartphone. I'll be working on converting the entire web site over the winter.

Dave Alston

Roe Deer in the Arnside/Silverdale AONB

During the summer, Debbie and I had an excellent camping holiday in Cumbria and North Lancashire. The first half of the holiday was mostly long walks on and around the fells in the Wasdale/Ennerdale area. (e.g. Scafell Pike, Pillar, Miterdale). There was a chance of seeing Red Squirrels in Ennerdale, but they weren't playing ball on that particular day. Maybe it was just too hot for them.

The second week was more about leisurely strolls on the far less lofty heights of the Arnside and Silverdale Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty. Some of you will know it well. Shared between Lancashire and Cumbria, this Limestone area includes Leighton Moss, Arnside Knott and Warton Crag.

We have often seen Red Deer on visits to Leighton Moss (and once, a glimpse of a Water Shrew, as it dashed across a boardwalk).

One day we decided to head up Arnside Knott, looking mostly for orchids and butterflies. It is a fine location for both of these and many other plants and invertebrates. No sign of the black rabbits, though, a few of which used to be occasionally seen in this area. That was back in the 1980s and there may well be none left by now.

After some orchid and butterfly spotting, we decided to head for nearby Heathwaite. Along the way, we were walking down a path when Debbie spotted something off to the left – a male Roe

Deer! Unfortunately, it must have had an urgent appointment elsewhere and disappeared into the trees. Seconds later, a female appeared. This one was in much less of a hurry, browsing as it slowly came closer to where we stood. I decided to get the camera out. Debbie did the same with our other camera.

Now, usually at this point, one of two things will happen. Either the subject of the photo takes flight at the first sign of a lens appearing, or a yappy dog appears from nowhere and



scares everything off over a half mile radius. Fortunately, neither of the above applied and the deer stayed around long enough for several photographs, even straying a little nearer, before finally venturing off up the slope and out of sight. It was definitely aware of our presence, ears twitching

at each click of the shutter, but didn't seem too bothered about us. Maybe it was because the breeze was blowing our scent away from it. Maybe it was because we're members of Derbyshire Mammal Group. I'd say it was a classic case of being in the right place at the right time.



I doubt if we'll be as lucky again for a while in getting such a clear, prolonged view of Roe Deer. I have a sneaking feeling there'll be a few yappy dog incidents before then.

Dave Alston

Harvest Mouse nest recording November 2014

Harvest mice are rarely seen in the wild. Fortunately, they leave signs of their presence in the form of their nests. These have usually been abandoned by the beginning of November and being woven, will survive intact for a few months. Find and identify the nest and there is your evidence of Harvest Mice!

The group usually has had at least one Harvest Mouse nest recording session each year since the first one at Erewash Meadows in 2003. The most recent was on what started as a rather damp Sunday at [The Avenue Washlands Reserve](#), near Chesterfield. Despite the weather, there was a bumper turnout of at least 20 people!

We were split into two groups, to cover different parts of the reserve. The rain stopped (as forecast, amazingly) and off we headed to see what we could find in the two hours.

Early findings in the group I was in were Field Vole nests and an old bird's nest. There were also further signs of Field Vole in the form of droppings, feeding signs and runs. Later in the morning, there was even a live Field Vole running around.

Moving to a favourable looking and more remote part of the reserve, we were soon rewarded with the discovery of a nicely woven nest, around the size of a tennis ball. Definitely that of a Harvest Mouse! This was followed by two more nests being found, fairly close to each other. Often, with Harvest Mice, if one nest is found, then there will be others within a few metres.

That was to be it for our group. The other group found four nests in total (well, they did have a slightly better habitat) not a bad total at all, bearing in mind that occasionally, no nests are found at all.

There were signs of other mammals, such as Water Vole, Fox, Badger and Mole and a number of birds, including Snipe and Teal.

A bumper turn out for the Harvest Mouse recording session, despite the damp start.



Dave Alston