

## Dormice

### Where can dormice be found and what are the signs they are present?

In planning for schemes affecting deciduous woodlands, hedgerows or scrub the presence of dormice should be investigated.

Dormice are small (about 7cm long) and are a bright golden colour with a thick furry tail and big black eyes. However, they are rarely seen as the dormouse is a strictly nocturnal species. During the day, they sleep in nests located in dense bramble bushes, hollow tree branches or old birds' nest. Dormice can spend at least 6 months hibernating over the winter (November – April).

The best indication of the presence of dormice is opened hazelnut shells on the ground. Dormice open these nuts by making a neat round hole on one side, leaving characteristic toothmarks around the outside edge of the hole, with a smooth inner rim. Alternatively, surveys can be undertaken involving the placement and monitoring of specially designed dormice nesting boxes (or even tubes) in appropriate habitat.

### What are the statutory requirements for protecting dormice?

Under the [Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981](#) (as amended) it is an offence to:

- intentionally or recklessly kill, injure, take, possess, sell or disturb otters (whether live or dead)
- intentionally or recklessly damage, destroy or obstruct their place of shelter or protection.

Dormice are also a European Protected Species and are subject to stringent safeguards under the [Habitats Regulations 1994](#). A survey should be undertaken to confirm the presence of European Protected Species where these are believed to be present or where habitat conditions make this likely. This survey should be undertaken by a suitably experienced and licensed ecologist.

If an activity is likely to result in disturbance or killing of a European Protected Species or damage to its habitat, a 'development licence' will usually be required from DEFRA. In order to obtain a licence it must be demonstrated that:

- the project is for the purpose of preserving public health or public safety or other reasons of overriding public interest, and
- there is no satisfactory alternative, and
- the action will not be detrimental to the population of the species.

Where the presence of a European Protected Species is known or likely, relevant survey information should be gathered and presented at the time of the planning application. The planning application will need to be determined, in the light of this survey information and with due consideration of the requirements of the Habitats Regulations, before DEFRA makes its decision about a development licence. If a developer is not granted a licence, this *could* mean that proceeding with the development *even with planning permission* results in illegal acts against European Protected Species or their habitat.

### What opportunities are there for mitigation or additional wildlife gains for dormice?

If a 'development licence' is issued, mitigation to minimise or compensate for any impacts is likely to be required. This may be significant and required in advance of development commencing, and may involve:

- planting of new areas of native trees, hedgerows and shrubs to provide cover and foraging habitat
- enhancement of existing habitats to improve them for dormice eg conversion of coniferous woodland to broadleaved, or increasing structural or species diversity
- placement of dormouse nest boxes
- translocation to another site.

Translocation of dormice should only be the last resort. The best option is to ensure that a large area of suitable habitat is retained on the site to support a viable population in the long term. If not, strong ecological links to adjoining habitats, for example along hedgerows, should be maintained.

Woodland, hedgerows and scrub can be managed and created to provide appropriate habitat for dormice. They require a diverse habitat of different trees and shrubs (especially hazel, honeysuckle, oak and bramble), with sprawling branches to provide routeways above the ground. Suitable conditions can also be created using coppice management.

Where scrub or tree cover is cleared in areas which might support dormice, for example during the establishment of cycleways on disused railways, it is very important to retain arboreal links between surviving habitat areas. Cleared areas and wide rides may interfere with the movement of dormice. Planting of species-rich hedges linking woodland areas also helps to reduce isolation.

Special boxes can be installed for dormice. Nestboxes put up with the entrance facing a tree trunk help the survival and breeding success of dormice.

Carrying out development and maintenance activities only at certain times of the year helps to reduce the risks to dormice. They should be undertaken either:

- in April and May – when dormice are active but not yet breeding, or
- in September and October – after young have been reared but before hibernation.

### **Where should I go for further information?**

English Nature. 1996. Dormouse Conservation Handbook.  
This is available from the Environment Directorate library.

DEFRA. 2002. [European Protected Species: Guidance Note](#).

DEFRA. October 2002. Circular 2/2002: New Guidance for Local Planning Authorities on European Protected Species and Changes in Licensing Procedures. This guidance modifies the way that planning authorities deal with European Protected Species when processing planning applications.