

RECORDERS' NEWSLETTER



Recorders Newsletter 30 (Spring 2013)

Periodically the RCT Local Biodiversity Action Plan group gets together and produces a review of a certain Biodiversity aspect. Last year we decided that our understanding of our mammal fauna needed an upgrade. We produced the following draft which, if we are not careful, will never see the light of day and no one will comment on. In order to avoid these pitfalls please read on. We hope you find it interesting and we welcome all and any observations.

MAMMALS

Habitat diversity equals diversity of mammal habitat: Rhondda Cynon Taf has a superb mosaic of semi-natural habitat therefore it is also rich in mammals. This Plan looks at all species of native (and long established non-natives) British mammals; As with most species groups there is no existing authoritative account of the mammals of the County Borough, so this Action Plan attempts to draw together our current understanding of the status of our mammalian fauna.

A number of species have been previously afforded individual action plans in Action for Nature: the LBAP for RCT; these are hedgehog, otter, badger, dormouse, red squirrel, brown hare, water vole and all bats. This Action Plan is an up-dated appraisal of these Action

Plans and includes consideration of a larger number of species, which together make up the 'wild' mammal fauna of the Authority. This Action Plan is based on existing knowledge of species status and conservation issues, it is incomplete and this incompleteness is a challenge to anyone who wants to 'fill in' the many and varied gaps in our understanding.

As is often the case an important source of records comes from the survey assessments required for planning applications and which are required by and reviewed by the Local Authority (and where appropriate CCW, now Natural Resources Wales). These provide part of the baseline for our understanding of the range and relative abundance of many species. However, the County Borough is lucky to have a highly dedicated group of wildlife recorders and through their input to the Recorders Newsletter Survey we are also able to fill in further gaps in our knowledge. For a national over-view and background the ageing, but invaluable 'Review of British Mammal (1995) by Harris, Morris, Wray and Yalden has been used, as have the National Action Plans for those species afforded them.

Mice and Voles (and rats)

There are 9 species of mice/vole and rat in RCT. Of the mice the **wood mouse** is abundant and particularly so in the

mosaics of lowland woodlands, permanent grasslands, gardens and hedgerows that make up much of the Authority. Many people see wood mice in their gardens or entering houses/outbuildings in the autumn and such they are a familiar, often seen, species. On the other hand, we have no positive records of **yellow-necked mouse**. However, this arboreal species is strongly associated with lowland semi-natural woodland sites and as such the well-wooded parts of the County Borough may ultimately prove to support populations of yellow-necks. We are similarly 'in the dark' with regards to the **house mouse**. Again the assumption is that the house mouse occurs in RCT (it far from an entirely urban species) but we have no recent records. However, there is better luck with the **harvest mouse**, which has only recently been found in Rhondda Cynon Taf. While a million place-mats on a hundred thousand dining tables have cute pictures of harvest mice 'couples' living in yellow wheat fields, in reality they prefer wetland sites and in our area have been found in unmanaged rhos pastures. Indeed the Review of British Mammal quotes Perrow's and Jowitt's opinions that harvest mice '*are often the most abundant small mammal in wetlands*'. Tussocks of purple moor-grass seems to be very important and provide the material for the skillfully weaved, ball shaped nests. The favoured means of finding evidence of harvest mice is to come across old nests in the winter, at the time when the nest balls become more obvious. So far, old harvest mice nests have been found in a several different fields within the Rhos Tonyrefail SSSI (as part of searches for marsh fritillary butterfly larval webs): there seem little doubt that the harvest mouse will use similar habitat elsewhere and wet grasslands in the Llantrisant/Llantwit Fardre area, Llanharan and in the Cynon Valley are prime candidates.

The **dormouse** benefits from the highest levels of UK and European legal protection. It has a very patchy distribution in Wales and in Rhondda Cynon Taf we are fortunate to support important population on the southern fringe of the coalfield. When we wrote the original dormouse RCT Biodiversity Action Plan (1999) we knew of only four dormouse sites in RCT. All were in the southern part of the County Borough with two in Llanharan area, one on the western side of Pontyclun and one east of Llantrisant. Perhaps the best known was (and still is) Brynna Woods/Llanharan Marsh (now a Wildlife Trust Nature Reserve), where the first colony was recorded in the 1983 'Great Nut Hunt'. Of the other sites, two were in privately owned woods, and the fourth in remnant ancient wood along streams in the Forestry Commission owned Coed Trecastell. In the last 12 years the spread of dormouse records has considerably filled in this distributional picture. We now know that dormice are very well established in the Llanharan and Llanharry area, using a network of small, often wet woodlands and interconnecting hedgerows. There is also now a thin scatter of records spreading east, through the Pontyclun/Llantrisant area, and Llantwit Fardre/Church Village to Ty Rhiw in the east (which connects into colonies further east into Caerphilly). We perhaps know of 12 or so sites, but in reality a number of these seem to merge and (hopefully) interconnect. There must be new sites and locations to be found in this southern fringe of the coalfield. Elsewhere, the woodlands and hedgerows of the northern border vale (Tonyrefail to Pontypridd), the Taff Valley woodlands (from Taffs Well to Abercynon) and the densely wooded southern end of Cynon Valley all support habitats which look good for dormouse. These are areas which deserve further survey attention.

So how do you survey for dormice? The best way is to visit any site with fruiting hazel bushes from late August through to October and look for hazel nuts and signs of the characteristic way the dormouse open them: which is a small neat hole, the sides of which looks like they have been scooped out by a miniature ice cream scoop. Grey squirrels smash the nuts, and although voles and other mice species do cut quite neat holes, these are never as perfectly neat as the dormouse and they never use an ice cream scoop. In 2007, Bridgend CBC produced an excellent dormouse leaflet, which is found at www.welshwildlife.org/attachments/south-walesdormousesurvey. The leaflet has some very fine photographs of dormouse nibbled hazel nuts, which can be used to compare any you find. Always retain the nuts you find, and if you are confident that you may have found a dormouse nut then please check the evidence with us, or CCW or the Wildlife Trust, to see if you are right and have found a new dormouse site.

Until quite recently dormice were thought to be restricted to large ancient woodland sites, where the diversity of trees and under-storey species could provide the food sources and the woodland structure that the exacting requirements of the species demand. You may imagine that total restriction to such a rare habitat would be an obvious problem for dormouse conservation. Fortunately, in the last decade, dormice have started to be found in other types of habitat. Hedgerows have always been seen as important connecting habitat, but more recent evidence suggests that dormouse populations may be supported by such habitat. Dormouse colonies are supported in extensive areas of bramble-covered 'undercliffs' at Lyme Regis in Dorset and in conifer plantations planted on ancient woodland sites and dormice have also been found using garden bird

feeders (presumably where gardens border woods or old hedgerows). All of which perhaps gives us a little more hope for dormouse conservation. The species is maybe a little more robust than we believed. However, despite possible crumbs of comfort, the dormouse is undoubtedly a rare and very vulnerable species, which needs help. Habitat severance, inappropriate management and habitat loss particularly compromise its future. No dormouse is going to struggle across the six lanes of the M4 (or any other main road). The provision of dormouse bridges on the new Church Village by-pass was ridiculed in the press but habitat severance is no joke for a species with such poor dispersal powers.

Dormice also hibernate for more of the year than they are active, and need to make the absolute most of their summers: poor, wet summers are particularly challenging for dormice, so the average summer weather in RCT may be a problem we can do little about.

The **bank** and **field voles** are both common species. The bank is supposed to be more closely associated with woodlands and hedgerows and the field prefers 'tussocky' grasslands. Rough grassland sites, whether wet or dry, are usually full of vole runs, evidence of vole feeding (piles of neatly cut grass stem) and vole droppings. It can be reasonably assumed that the field vole populations of RCT are huge. In stark comparison we have no recent records of **water vole**. Old records exist, ten years ago there was a tantalizing report of possible water vole swimming across open water on Tirfounder Fields, and more recently a population has been found in north-west Cardiff, but no populations have been found in RCT. A much suspected reason for the water voles decline is predation by mink and it now seems highly unlikely that any populations remain on our lowland rivers. Perhaps the best bet is in

the uplands, in forestry and peat bog pools away from the main populations of mink.

Although not native, it is impossible not to mention the brown rat; abundant and beautifully adapted to modern life, brown rats rate the highest of high on any list of vermin.

Shrews

Three species of shrew occur in RCT. **Common shrews** are abundant and much more frequently heard (shrews are shrill!) than seen alive (dead common shrews are often come across – they live frantic, but short lives). If our 'shrew' situation matches the national picture, the **pigmy shrew** will not only prove to be common, but will be more abundant than their bigger cousin on our upland bogs and heaths. The **water shrew** lives a semi-aquatic life and is found in wetlands with pools and streams. It is generally considered to be only locally common, mainly as a result of his habitat requirements. Water shrews have been found on several sites in RCT (sometimes discovered using reptile refuges) and together with harvest mice can be considered to be an important part of the small mammal fauna of our wetland sites.

Squirrels

The sad demise of our native red squirrels doesn't need re-telling. What can be said is that **reds** were present in our woodlands fifty years ago, and while old records are few and far between, the most recent anecdotal record I have are from the woods around the Rhondda and Abercynon in the early 1960s and in the woods near the Glamorgan University, Treforest in the 1980s or 90s.

The species decline and demise is reflected in its protection via Schedules 5 and 6 of the Wildlife and Countryside Act. The original version of Action for Nature

included a stand-alone red squirrel plan. At that time we still harboured realistic hopes that a red squirrel population might have persisted in the upland conifer plantations: the one woodland habitat, which doesn't automatically favour the grey squirrel. However we have had no reports of reds within these forests in the 12 years since the LBASP was first published and the hopes that a mountain retreat exists have receded.

However during the life of the LBAP we have had a curious cluster of possible red squirrel sightings. Dan Forman the Glamorgan Mammal Recorder contacted us in the mid 2000s regarding possible red squirrel sightings at Llanharry. Two local residents gave Dan fairly convincing descriptions of 'small, rich red and tufted ears'. This followed on from two unconfirmed red squirrel records from Llantwit Fardre (c2000) and reports since the 1990s of red squirrel being seen on two or three occasions in the Gelliwion area of Pontypridd. Therefore, there is a case for hoping that a small population of red squirrel may be present (or may have been present until recently) in an area between Llanharry and Pontypridd. However, we have had no further possibly records in the last 5 years and we may never be able to establish whether these reports did refer to real reds, or just 'red tinged' greys.

In comparison, and without any surprise, **grey squirrels** are ubiquitous and often abundant. Reports from Maerdy of much greater numbers of grey squirrels in recent years provides anecdotal evidence of their continued spread into our more upland areas. This raises concerns that any remnant red squirrels are going to find it hard to re-establish when faced with such competition.

Hedgehog

The much-loved **hedgehog** was the subject of its own Action Plan in the

original Action for Nature. It gained that status via the 'popular vote' as a locally valued species. For many years a 'hedgehog map' was taken to biodiversity events and people encouraged to put a pin into the map to record where they had recently seen hedgehogs in RCT. A very unscientific exercise, but sufficient to show a sprinkle of records throughout urban and sub-urban RCT. Nationally the 'Review of British Mammals' described hedgehogs as having a 'patchy distribution' in Britain. Our wet, mild climate should suit hedgehogs, providing perfect conditions for slugs and snails (major food source). Hedgehog numbers also appear to be affected by **badger** predation and population densities are lower where badger densities are high. Badgers are not common in RCT and this may bode well for hedgehogs. There certainly appears no lack of road squashed hedgehogs, and if that is a guide to abundance we can at least be confident that hedgehogs are still present in reasonable numbers.

Mole

Originally a woodland species, **moles** appear to be well established and distributed in RCT, particularly so in lowland areas. The 'Review of British Mammals' highlights the importance of soil depth for moles (enough depth is needed to tunnel), so can it be assumed that the thinner valley side soils of our valleys support fewer moles? We have no information to confirm or contradict that assumption.

Mustelids

The two commonest mustelids are the **weasel** and **stoat**. These can surely both be considered to be common and widespread species; however in reality we receive very few reports or records for either species (hint, hint!).

Of the 'rarer' species, we receive lots of records of road-killed **polecats**: indeed

polecats are probably one of our best-reported mammal species. Photos of a number of these have been sent to the Vincent Wildlife Trust for verification and they always seem to come back as polecats, rather than some ferret or polecat/ferret cross. We even get the odd live polecat report, usually from farmyards or allotments and young animals have been caught in (and released from) 'live-catch' rattraps. The evidence strongly suggests that polecats are well established in RCT and may prove to be fairly common. Dan Foreman (The Glamorgan Mammal Recorder) in confirming a polecat record from Mark Evans said *'great stuff (although always sad to see one dead on the roads. If you do come across any others (or indeed weasel, stoat, etc), I would be extremely grateful if you could contact me as there is a mammal atlas project running at the moment, please spread that all mammal records, no matter if they are common species (mole, rat, rabbit, mice etc) are extremely valuable'*...so a further hint, hint and an action for this plan.

In the early 2000s the Vincent Wildlife Trust co-ordinated a **pine martin** survey of Wales. This primarily consisted of collating records submitted through a well-published poster campaign. The interim survey findings included two (high confidence) records from the Brecon Beacons National Park bit of RCT, just north of Hirwaun. Rather tantalising and out of the blue, in the early 2000s we received a number of unconfirmed, but plausible reports (and usually preceded with 'you won't believe this, but ...') of possible pine martins. The first was of a person 'rabbit-ing' with a Harris hawk in the Llanwanno Forest. Instead of delivering a dead rabbit to the feet of the falconer, the bird dropped a live pine martin (which instantly escaped). I was also told of a possible encounter with a pine martin in woods in Llanharan, when a 'non-squirrel', 'non-cat', mustelid type

mammal was seen to quickly exit a tree. Round about the same time, near the Arthur Llewellyn Furniture Store, Llantrisant, a local naturalist saw a large mustelid loping quickly across a field and heading for woodland. It was described as too big for a polecat/mink and too small for an otter. These three records all coincided with one another, and we have had none since. Given the huge extent of perfectly usage habitat, there is a possibility that pine martin do occur in the County Borough. Anyone who has a sighting of a pine martin (even if years old) is asked to contact Dr Johnny Binks, VWT, 3&4 Bronsil Courtyard, Eastnor, Ledbury, Herefordshire, HR8 1EP (01531 636441).

Otter are fully protected under UK and European law and they represent one of the great success stories of British mammals. At the publication of the original Action for Nature Otter Plan in 2000, the species was in the process of re-colonising the County Borough. Today otter have re-colonised the whole of the County Borough's River catchment. Since the original LBAP reports of 'sprainting' (droppings), footprints and live otter sightings have increased significantly and the species has spread through the Rhondda catchment and up and down the Cynon, Taff and Ely catchments. Curiously the number of road-killed otter reported to the Council (which increased up until the mid 2000s) has declined in the last 5 years. Whether this any indication of a decline in numbers is not known: What we are aware of is a general improving water quality of most of our rivers, the provision of otter ledges and tunnels for recent road schemes (notably Porth Relief Road and the Church Village by-pass), the creation (in various places) of artificial otter holts and amongst the scatter of records two or three hotspots, where reports are most frequent and evidence suggests breeding. This includes the finding of holt

sites and reports of adult with young otters. We still have a poor overall understanding of the true status of otter in RCT and we have only educated guess work to suggest possibly breeding areas. A few years ago the Environment agency for Wales identified the South Wales Valleys as an area where otter recovery lagged behind the rest of Wales. It would be interesting to update that position for 2012.

Mink are relatively recent additions to our fauna. The likely impacts on water vole are discussed above. There are surprisingly few mink records forthcoming in the Recorders Newsletter and possibly mink numbers may be declining, perhaps in response to increasing otter numbers.

Badger

A species, which needs no introduction, **badger** are very strongly protected via there own 1992 Act. Badger appears to be a rather scarce and secretive species in RCT. This is backed up by the infrequency with which badger is recorded in ecological work for planning applications, the few records made by local recorders and the lack of road kill reports. Persecution and disturbance may be a factor in the species scarcity, but the thin valley soils of much of the Authority prohibits sett digging, and in general RCT may just not be a prime badger habitat.

Red Fox

Another hugely familiar species, the **red fox** is abundant and ubiquitous: to say anything more would be to waffle.

Brown hare and rabbit

These are two long-standing, but ultimately non-native species: the **brown hare** is a scarce species in RCT and nearly all records come from the south-west of the Authority roughly from Tonyrefail down to Llanharan and Llanharry. Outside this area brown hare appear to be very rarely seen. One factor,

which may reduce the chances of the brown hare are wet springs and the impacts on their leveret young. Our climate may not suit the brown hare.

Rabbit numbers ebb and flow with the ebb and flow of myxomatosis, but they are always widespread and often locally abundant.

Deer

Rhondda Cynon Taf is one of the few places in Britain to be largely without deer. The native **roe deer** is not present and while occasional reports are received of deer seen in the upland plantations (presumably of fallow deer straying from Margam Park); these are few and far between. Deer populations are increasing and spreading in many across Britain, and it seems inevitable that at least one species will colonise RCT in the near future. This may involve roe or **muntjac** from further east, or **fallow** from the west, or **red** from the Brecon Beacons.

Bats

We know that 11 species of bat definitely occur in RCT although there may be as many as 14 or 15. This range in number reflects the difficulties in surveying and assessing bats. The following is an attempt to summarise our current understanding of species status.

The most frequently encountered species are the pipistrelles. Two pipistrelle species definitely occur; the **common** and **soprano pipistrelle**, and a third (the newly discovered) **Narthusius pipistrelle** may also be present. The common and soprano pipistrelles are both common and well established in RCT. A review of bat survey reports indicates that the soprano pip is more frequently recorded than its near identical relation. These bats are able to adapt to a multitude of house and building types and they are the species most frequent associated with urban areas. They are also the least

sensitive to street and garden lighting (or perhaps more accurately the least repulsed by artificial light).

Brown long-eared bats appear to be the next most common species recorded (after the two main pipistrelle species) in planning application surveys. Typically their roosts occur in barns, or buildings with large roof spaces, and activity surveys also often pick them up feeding in wooded gardens or farmyards. Brown long-eared bats have been found hibernating in railway tunnels in RCT.

Daubenton's bat is the classic river or lake species. They rarely appear in the typical building surveys required of planning applications, but do get identified in activity surveys on adjacent watercourses. They are at least locally common in RCT. The lakes at Dare Valley Country Park are a good place to watch hunting Daubenton's bats, and their distinctive, low level, figure of eight sweeps across the lake surfaces.

Natterer's bats are fairly often recorded in planning application surveys for building applications. They appear to be relatively common and widely distributed in the County Borough. Two species, which are usually very hard to differentiate between are **whiskered** and **Brandt's** and as a result they appear in bat reports with a slash between them; an indication that one or the other, or perhaps both have been recorded (a situation, which is now further confused by a further new near identical UK species: **Alcathoe** bat). Convention suggest that the whiskered is the more common, but in RCT we have no real idea of relative status, save saying that Whiskered/Brandt's is a fairly frequently recorded species, although less so than Natterer's.

The most spectacular bat species in RCT is the **noctule**. A swift sized, early evening fighter ace, which twists, and

dives, soars and plunges in dynamic aerial displays. These magnificent bats are tree roosters, which soon after sunset seem to suddenly appear (like magic) over favourite hunting areas. Their calls booming out from bat detectors. In a horse grazed pasture near my home, I can watch up to 6 noctules gather on May and June evenings, when the cockchafers are out or the ghost moths' dance over the buttercups. The feeding frenzy is something to behold, and clearly shows the importance of old pasture as bat foraging habitat. Noctules appear well distributed and relatively common in RCT and often figure in activity surveys undertaken for planning applications. Their roosts are more difficult to find and not one has been found in planning applications for buildings. The noctule's slightly smaller relative; the **serotine** has recently been recorded for the first time in RCT, but we have no clear idea of its status.

Of the 'rarer' species, the tree roosting **barbastelle** was recorded in the early 2000s as part of planning application work from a wooded lane in the Llanharan area. The bat was doing what barbastelle apparently do: which is to say it was making long feeding sweeps along a section of wooded country lane. Perhaps somewhere in Llanharan, in a series of tree holes and hollows, there is a barabstelle roost. Other similar areas of open woodland/parkland with mature trees occur elsewhere in RCT, but for the moment we know nothing more of the species status in RCT.

Perhaps our most iconic species is the **lesser horseshoe**. This has only recently been discovered in RCT (the last ten years), but in the southwest of the County Borough we now know of at least one major maternity roost site (numbering 150 or more bats) using old outbuilding associated with an old house, and a probable hibernation roost (within a mine

working void). In addition we have a further series of tantalising bat activity reports from the Llanharan/Pontyclun, Aberdare, and Pontypridd. These include records of lesser horseshoe bats moving through street lit urban areas of Pontypridd, which is something lesser horseshoe bats really aren't supposed to do! There is also a record of a lesser horseshoe bat dropping in a disused tunnel near Aberdare. Evidence suggests that there may be at least three lesser horseshoe maternity roosts on RCT – a known and monitored site in the southwest, and still to be found roosts in the Aberdare and Pontypridd areas. The probable bat hibernation roost in the mine void is highly vulnerable to disturbance, and does not receive any monitoring. None of RCT's lesser horseshoe sites has statutory protection via SAC or SSSI designation. Recently work for planning application has recorded **great horseshoe** bats passing through an open hillside locality in the Llanharan area. These records came from the autumn and may represent a migratory movement of bats from summer to hibernation areas.

Well that was a trawl through our current knowledge of RCT's mammals. It is most definitely a collective effort and any thoughts, or observations, corrections or amendments will be gratefully received. The next Newsletter will be back to the usual collation of new records and reports, so please keep them coming.

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