



Harvest Mouse

Local Biodiversity Action Plan

Species English Name(Scientific name)

HARVEST MOUSE (MICROMYS MINUTUS)



Ecology

Appearance

The harvest mouse is Britain's smallest rodent and the only one to have a prehensile tail. Their tail enables them to grab and balance of thin objects such as tall blades of grass. Harvest mice have a reddish-yellow coat with white undersides, small hairy ears and a blunt nose.

Food

Harvest mice feed on grass seed, fruit, berries, grain and occasionally insects in the winter. Moss, roots and fungi may also contribute to their varied diet.

Habitat

Harvest mice get their name from their association with cereal crop fields however they are also found in grasslands, reedbeds, hedgerows, bramble and open fields.

Predators

Many harvest mice die each winter from cold and starvation. In addition barn owls, stoats, weasels, crows, foxes and cats predate them.



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Lifestyle

Harvest mice are extremely active climbers and make nests from shredded grasses above ground lashed between tall grass stems. The nests are round and tennis-ball sized. Harvest mice are mostly nocturnal and will build several nests for sleeping, resting and breeding. Females have two or three litters per year between May and October.

Harvest mice do not hibernate but become much less active in winter staying close to the ground for warmth and insulation feeding on stored food.

Current status

The harvest mouse was once previously described as common and widespread throughout Britain occupying a wide range of habitats but favouring areas of tall, dense vegetation. It has always been more prevalent in southern counties.

There is little known about the natural history, present status and distribution of the harvest mouse in the UK. The species is considered 'Vulnerable' in the UK and 'Endangered' and 'Near-Endangered' in many parts of its vast worldwide range.

Mitchell Jones (1996) believed the harvest mouse to be a species declining but widespread in England. In 1973 Stephen Harris of the Mammal Society carried out a study to establish the status and distribution of the harvest mouse in Britain and to collect data on its habitats requirements. In Vice County 58, 13 records of nests were recorded from 8, 10km grid squares by the end of 1977 (1205 records in the UK), a further 3, 10km grid squares contained pre-1960 records.

The species can easily pass undetected and is, therefore, vulnerable to under-recording. In May 1996 the Mammal Society carried out a "Harvest Mouse Tennis Ball" national survey at 13 sites within the UK with grids of 50 tennis balls. Only one of the tennis balls was occupied by a harvest mouse during the survey. In 2007, the Harvest Mouse was added to the UKBAP priority. In 2008 harvest mice were found in a new location in the Cheshire region.

Threats

- * Agricultural practices (intensive farming methods - pesticides, crop rotation)
- * Habitat destruction - fragmentation, wetland draining
- * Lack of information and poor species identification - under-recording, and lack of knowledge of Harvest Mouse ecology
- * Extreme weather conditions - linked-in with a naturally occurring 'boom & bust' ecology, the added problems of habitat destruction etc listed above focus this issue.



How are we helping to conserve Harvest Mice in the Cheshire region?

- * The Mammal Society has produced preliminary results of its 2-year (1996/7) follow-up survey of 800 sites where harvest mice were recorded in the 1970's.
- * The Cheshire Mammal Group were actively involved in the captive breeding programme. The harvest mice were released at three sites in Cheshire and are continually monitored by Cheshire Mammal Group.
- * Data analysis: On going analysis of trapping records. All records are being sent through to 'rECOrd'.
- * Raising awareness of this species in Cheshire. Eg. through attendance at Cheshire Mammal Group Meetings, Cheshire Wildlife Trust's 'Only One Earth' exhibition, talks to other natural history groups, and through extensive press and television coverage.

Objectives, targets and actions

The objectives, targets and actions to help conserve Harvest Mice in the Cheshire region can be found on the [Biodiversity Action Reporting System \(BARS\)](#) along with full details of our progress so far.

How to find out more about harvest mice

Chester Zoo article 'The 2003 Harvest Mouse Release'
Cheshire Wildlife Trust Harvest Mouse webpage

How can you get involved?

Anyone wishing to become involved with live mammal trapping sessions should contact Penny Rudd, at Chester Zoo on 01244 650215.

Contact details

LBAP Chair Penny Rudd, Chester Zoo

References and Glossary

Harris, S. (1979): History, distribution and habitat requirements of the Harvest Mouse in Britain, Mammal Review, Volume 9, No. 4, 159-171.
Mitchell-Jones, A.J. (1996): Mammal in England, a conservation action priority list, English Nature No.26

