

MAMMAL REPORT, ISLE OF WIGHT, 2017 – 2021

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Introduction

The following report is an account of the accumulation of records submitted to, and verified by, the Isle of Wight Natural History and Archaeological Society during the period January to December 2021. It follows an earlier report of records received between 2010 and 2016, published in 2017 (Grogan, 2017). The volume of verified records received by the Society does not warrant annual reports, but we hope these periodic reports help readers get a general impression of the status and distribution of these species. Other anecdotal observations are alluded to where they have received attention in other spheres, particularly social media, but no confirmation has been secured.

As well as records and observations being received, the author has been able to acquire and dissect 264 pellets (1882 prey items) from resident barn owls from six locations during this period. Records from the dissection of owl pellets give an impression of abundance of some small mammal species but cannot provide accurate records of distribution.

The Isle of Wight Natural History and Archaeological Society would like to thank all those who submit records of all observations of the flora and fauna of the Isle of Wight and particular thanks for mammal records are given in the acknowledgements at the end of this paper. Over 2200 mammal records were received over the period.

This report includes results from the water vole survey commissioned by the Isle of Wight Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty and partnered with Hampshire and Isle of Wight Wildlife Trust in 2020. Our thanks go to Andy Rothwell for doing the surveys. Other water vole surveys were undertaken with funding from Natural Enterprise and another sponsor on the Gunville Stream and Newtown respectively.

Systematic List:

Nomenclature follows Crawley et al. (2020).

Abbreviations for UK status:

N=native; **N?**= possibly native;

I = introduced; **I?** = possible introduction

Abbreviation for Isle of Wight status:

n=native; **n?**= possibly native;

i=introduced; **i?**=possibly introduced

Hedgehog (*Erinaceus europaeus*): **N, i?**

Locally common but declining

Of the records submitted to the Society 30% (615) were of hedgehog, as it is one of the iWatch 'Species of the Month'. The majority of records come from the east of the Island in gardens and other urban situations. We are grateful to the Hedgehog Hospital for their records. We assume that this distinctive and much-loved mammal is declining on the Island in common with the situation on the mainland, but no systematic survey has been undertaken.

The recent Atlas of British Mammals (Crawley et al., 2020) suggests that the hedgehog was introduced to the Isle of Wight. This is the first time this has been suggested and requires further investigation.

Mole (*Talpa europaea*): **N, n**

Common and stable

This common species was recorded frequently by the public (8% of records) and is almost certainly under-recorded. There are few habitats the mole is not found, and in some situations, it may be considered undesirable, if not a pest.

Very unusually, a single specimen was found in an owl pellet

Common Shrew (*Sorex araneus*): **N, n**

Abundant but declining?

Rarely recorded by the public in common with many of

the small, and habitually nocturnal, small mammals that make up our resident mammal fauna. Found in both woodland and grassland habitats, it is common prey of owls. However, shrews are being found as a decreasing proportion of the owl's diet on the Island indicating that either numbers of other small mammals are increasing, or the numbers of common shrew are declining. The decline may mirror that of the hedgehog which has similar dietary requirements.

15% of items found in owl pellets, a significant reduction from previous studies.

Pygmy Shrew (*Sorex minutus*): **N, n**

Common and stable

Pygmy shrew is rarely recorded by the public and this species is often confused with its similar cousin described above. The pygmy shrew is more likely to be found in grassland habitats but is always less abundant in both trapping and owl pellet surveys.

3% of items found in owl pellets.

(Water shrew *Neomys fodiens*)

(This species is included as it is listed as present in the recent Atlas of Mammals (Crawley et al., 2020) but there have never been any verified records of this species on the Isle of Wight.)

Rabbit (*Oryctolagus cuniculus*): **I, i**

Common but declining

Frequently found in submissions of records by the public (5% of records received) and always thought to be ubiquitous. However there seems to be an observable decline in this species as a result of increased predation and disease – the latter may weaken the animal to allow the former to occur. Local extinctions due to myxomatosis have been reported but these populations are quickly replaced by neighbouring colonies.

Brown Hare (*Lepus europaeus*): I, i

Locally common but declining

A commonly recorded species (13% of records) with a widespread distribution in suitable habitats. This is another iWatch 'Species of the Month'. A number of observers have noted local declines in populations, and this may be due to increased predation. However, the author has described the cyclic nature of hare populations (Grogan et al., 2013) and any declines may be temporary. Further study on this is required.

Red squirrel (*Sciurus vulgaris*): N, n

Common and stable

This species is commonly recorded by members of the public (24% of records submitted) and is still found in the majority of our woodlands. This is probably our most iconic species of mammal and whilst populations may fluctuate locally, the population does seem to be stable Island-wide.

Common Dormouse (*Muscardinus avellanarius*):

N, n Locally common but declining

Unsurprisingly, this small nocturnal mammal does not appear much in records from the public. The few records received are from nests found in boxes or in hedges. The dormouse remains locally common in suitable habitat but there are indications that warmer, wetter summers are reducing over-winter survival in hibernation.

Found in a number of owl pellets, making 0.3% of items found. This is a reduction from previous studies possibly reinforcing the observations of a decline due to climate change.

Bank Vole (*Myodes glareolus*): N, n

Abundant and stable

One of the small mammals, found predominantly in hedges and woods, which is poorly recorded by members of the public. There is also confusion with the field vole regarding identification. Without evidence to the contrary, the species remains abundant in suitable habitats.

4% of items found in owl pellets.

Field Vole (*Microtus agrestis*): N, n

Abundant and stable

Although rarely recorded by the public, this species is the most common prey item in owl pellets and has slightly increased in occurrence from previous studies.

53% of items found in owl pellets, a small increase since previous studies.

Water Vole (*Arvicola amphibius*): N, n

Locally common but declining

The water vole survey showed that this nationally scarce mammal was present on the catchments of the River Medina and Eastern Yar but has been lost from the Western Yar since the last survey in 2015. On the Eastern Yar, there has been a gradual decline of 22% in distribution in the catchment since 1996. It is thought the decline would have been greater if it were not for the positive management work undertaken between 2015 and 2020 by partners funded by the Down to the Coast project.

Unusually, a single specimen was found in an owl pellet.

Harvest Mouse (*Micromys minutus*): I, i

Locally common but uncertain

Nests were found at Thorness, Newtown, Porchfield, Shalfleet, Hale Common and Alverstone, confirming the distribution of this elusive and tiny rodent. The presence of this species was overlooked for many years and is still under-recorded. Their nests can be confused with other species of mammal (and some birds) and even though nests are now much more commonly discovered, a specimen of a living animal has eluded naturalists for over a century.

Wood Mouse (*Apodemus sylvaticus*): N, n

Abundant and stable

The most frequently recorded small mammal species by the public, making up 1% of all records submitted. The species is common in both woodland and grasslands and may find its way into rural houses, particularly in winter.

21% of items found in owl pellets. This is a significant increase from previous studies, and it seems that this species has replaced common shrew in the diet of barn owls in some areas. It is not known if this is due to an increase in wood mouse populations or a decrease in common shrew.

House Mouse (*Mus musculus*): I, i

Common (under-recorded)

A common commensal species, found in houses and other situations close to humans. However few records are submitted by the public but there is no reason to believe that this species is not common in both urban and rural situations. Often considered a pest its presence is not desired, and this may lead to under-recording.

Found in owl pellets, making 0.3% of items found.

Brown Rat (*Rattus norvegicus*): I, i

Abundant and increasing

The water vole survey found that the brown rat occupied 95% of the sites surveyed as part of the Eastern Yar survey and was also found commonly on the other site surveyed (Newtown, Western Yar, Monktonmead and Medina). Thirteen records were submitted by the public.

3% of items found in owl pellets.

Red Fox (*Vulpes vulpes*): N, i

Common and increasing

Although an introduced species to the Isle of Wight, the red fox thrives in both rural and urban situations in the 21st century and is commonly recorded making up 6% of records submitted. Although known to be a problem with keepers of poultry, many reports include comments that perhaps the fox is not always a welcome visitor to gardens, reinforcing the opinion that it is increasing its population.

Badger (*Meles meles*): I, i

Common and increasing

Badger, another introduced mammal species, also seems to be increasing in urban situations and makes up 3% of records submitted. The presence of badgers seems to give both joy to observers in their gardens

and despair to developers hoping to build in towns and villages across the Island. Once only found south of the chalk ridge, they have spread to many sites north of the Island.

Otter (*Lutra lutra*) N, n

Rare but uncertain

The water vole survey (2020) showed a large increase in otter activity across the Isle of Wight. Otter activity was recorded on the Medina and Monktonmead but was most evident on the Eastern Yar where it was recorded along the river from source to sea and indicates that otters have resided in an Island river for the first time in 60 years. A Hampshire and Isle of Wight Wildlife Trust camera trap recorded two otters on the River Yar at Newchurch in the same year.

Stoat (*Mustela erminea*) N, n

Locally common and stable

The most frequently observed of two similar species (3% of records submitted) this species is difficult to survey and many records depend on observation of the animal itself. Common and widely distributed across the Island the population seems to be stable. May still be persecuted in some circumstances as a predator of game birds.

Very unusually, a stoat in ermine (white fur with a black tail) was observed (and filmed) at Lynch Lane, Calbourne in February 2021.

Weasel (*Mustela nivalis*) N, n

Locally common but declining?

An under-recorded or declining species. Due to confusion with its larger cousin (the stoat) and the difficulty of surveying, it is hard to understand the population dynamics of this species on the Island. Few records submitted by the public so, with its wide distribution, the Society is keen to get more records to understand more about the distribution and status of the weasel.

Red Deer (*Cervus elaphas*) N, i

Uncertain

A number of records of this species have been submitted, the majority around the deer enclosure at Chale where this species is farmed. A record from Godshill in 2017 was the furthest from the farm. There is no evidence that this species has bred outside the fence, but it must only be a matter of time.

Reeves Muntjac Deer (*Muntiacus reevesi*) I, i

A single record of this species was verified by photographs around Chale in June 2020. It is not known how the specimen arrived and no further records were submitted. It is assumed that this does not represent a viable population of this highly damaging non-native species.

Fallow Deer (*Dama dama*) I, i

This species is farmed at Carisbrooke and the population is entirely within the fencing. No records have been verified of this species living outside this farm.

Feral goat (*Capra* sp): I, i

This species is on the British list and are described as 'feral' on the mainland. The introduced Isle of Wight population, approximately 40 in number, on Bonchurch Down, is managed by the National Trust and no records have been verified of this species living outside the fence.

Special note:

Marine mammal breeding on the Isle of Wight

Grey Seal (*Haliochoerus grypus*)

This protected species is commonly recorded in both the Solent and the Channel but comes on land to give birth. In late 2021 two separate records of grey seal pups were recorded at Newtown and Bembridge which are the first records of breeding seals on the Isle of Wight for over 200 years. The nearest colony is at Chichester Harbour and these females may have come from there.

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