

## Dormice on the doorstep

When Holyford Woods became a Local Nature Reserve, evidence of dormice – a Devon priority species – was found in the woodland. The presence of these beautiful, tree-living mice formed an important part of the management plan, which prescribes the future conservation of the woods. But there was a problem, how to monitor the dormouse population.

Dormice are small, ginger rodents, with a prehensile fluffy tail that they use when climbing trees. They spend all their time in the branches, very rarely coming down to the ground. They are nocturnal and spend up to nine months of the year sleeping. All of which makes them very difficult to study.

Their presence in the wood was well known; signs of their feeding had been found and one time the chair of the Holyford Woodland Trust, who lives locally, had one land in his bath!

A monitoring scheme was set in place, with seventy nest boxes erected in the woods. These boxes are checked each month to keep track of the dormice in the wood. However, Holyford Woods had another trick in store. The woodland is so great for dormice that the new boxes were not used immediately and all but one pair remained in the natural nooks and crannies they've used for generations amongst the trees.

It's a double-edged sword. As frustrating as it is to not have loads of dormice taking up the generous offer of accommodation, the reason why they have remained elusive is reassuring. The woods have benefited from being largely forgotten for the last 25 years. With very little work being carried out on the woods, the trees have developed naturally. This means that there is a very natural understory of vegetation, with openings in the tight canopy made where trees have been blown over. One of the most important features of Holyford Woods is the amount of standing deadwood. A massive oak tree may produce leaves and grow for five hundred years, but when it comes to the end of its growing life a whole new existence begins.



Living trees support a staggering amount of life, but one of the most valuable resources they produce for the woodland is deadwood. Bats are mammals that benefit particularly from lots of natural deadwood. Not only do the nooks and crannies provide useful roosting sites, but the wood itself can be thought of as a bat food factory. Lots of insect grubs, particularly beetles use deadwood to burrow through and eat. If dead trees are ruthlessly removed from a forest this glut of insects is also removed.

Back to the dormice; and its good news. A male was first found overwintering in a nestbox between November and April. In June he was in a nearby nestbox, with a female dormouse. Sure enough, in our most recent box check, the female was found with a litter of four pink, hairless dormice in the centre of a tight nest. These little defenceless, blind things that look a bit like jelly babies would have been under a week old. They will grow quickly on the female's milk and they need to – because they need to put on enough weight to start hibernating in a few months time! Sleeping for 9 months of the year may sound like bliss, but it brings with it its own collection of stresses.