

### First confirmed record of Hazel Dormouse (*Muscardinus avellanarius*) in the wild in Ireland

On 30 August 2010, an email was received by the National Parks and Wildlife Service from a member of the public in Co. Kildare. Three photographs were attached and the email asked whether the animals shown were Red Squirrels. While the animals shown did superficially resemble red squirrels, being chestnut red in colour and possessing hairy tails, it was immediately apparent that they were not squirrels. They looked to be dormice and Dr Tony Mitchell-Jones of Natural England, a dormouse expert, was quickly able to confirm that they were young Hazel Dormice *Muscardinus avellanarius* (Linnaeus, 1758).

FM visited the garden in the countryside outside Naas where the dormice had been photographed and was able to confirm that the photograph had been taken in that location. However, a brief search for signs, such as nests or nibbled hazel nuts, was unsuccessful and the dormice were not seen again by that home-owner.

On 7 November 2012, the Kildare Animal Foundation's Wildlife Unit were contacted by a member of the public near Newbridge in Co. Kildare who had found a strange animal while cleaning out a tree-house. DD went to meet the lady with the animal and she handed over the box in which it was contained. On viewing the animal in question it was thought to be a Hazel Dormouse and this identification was confirmed by CL. The dormouse was brought back to the Animal Shelter to be cared for. In the days that followed DD re-visited the site from which the dormouse had come. It was found that the animal had been living in perfect dormouse habitat.

Some hazel nut shells were found at the site which had been clearly nibbled by a dormouse.

Extensive media coverage about the animal followed, which in turn has led to several further reports of dormice from the same area of central Co. Kildare. It would appear that a breeding population may have become established in the area.

Dormice are native to central Europe, and are also found in southern England and Wales (Mitchell-Jones *et al.* 1999). Their preferred habitat is broad-leaved woodland, with a well-developed shrub layer. However they can also survive perennially in overgrown hedgerows, in particular those containing Hazel (*Corylus avellana* Linnaeus, 1753) or bramble (*Rubus fruticosus* agg.). They nest in shrubs during the year, but take to winter nests on the ground, where they hibernate from October to April. Their diet changes seasonally as they feed sequentially on flowers and pollen, insects and fruit and nuts with the changing seasons (Bright and Morris 2008).

A number of possible routes of arrival for the current animals in Kildare have been considered including the horticultural trade and horse racing industry. Given the extensive nature of the horse-breeding and racing industry in central Kildare and the regular traffic of horse boxes back and forth to England this may perhaps be the most likely explanation. However, a deliberate introduction cannot be ruled out.

At least one historical reference to the release of dormice in Ireland exists. Under the heading "Attempted acclimatisation of the Dormouse in Ireland", well known Irish naturalist, R.M. Barrington had this note published in 1885 (Barrington 1885):

— *I have to-day (November 13th) set free six healthy Dormice which I received from London. They have been released in a thicket near some hazel-bushes. The Dormouse is not an Irish quadruped, and it may be as well to place on record an indication of what is, so far as I am aware, the first "centre of introduction" in Ireland.— R. M. Barrington (Fassaroe, Bray, County Wicklow).*

These animals were, as far as we can establish, never heard of again.

The indications from other countries are that dormouse are unlikely to become an invasive or pest species if they do become established; they are rare enough to be a focus of conservation efforts in England for example (Bright *et al.* 2006). Nonetheless, predicting the impact of non-native species is notoriously difficult and given that dormice do have a potentially high reproductive rate, a close eye will need to be kept on them.

To begin with a dedicated dormouse survey of central Kildare would appear to be warranted and plans are underway in NUI Galway for this to start in spring 2013.

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Bright, T. and Morris, P. (2008) Hazel dormouse

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Figure 1.

## Book Reviews