

## ONGAR WILDLIFE SOCIETY - DORMICE by Rebecca Banks

Rebecca Banks is a Project officer for the Essex Wildlife Trust and deals specifically with biodiversity, i.e a group of 40 or more nature conservation organisations dealing with landscape and community projects. Of special interest to her, are dormice, which incidentally are **not** mice! They are 'k' strategists which means that they spend a lot of their time expanding energy and nurturing their young. The nocturnal, hazel dormouse is very scarce and least understood. They are of a golden colour, large dark eyes and a tail almost as long as their body. They are about 6-9 cm long and the adults weigh between 15-35 grams. Dormice are found widely across Europe and Africa. In the UK, they are limited to south and western counties, in others they have become extinct.

'R' strategists are moles and voles who are great with their young, are very reproductive, but tend to die young. Dormice are active from Spring to late Autumn, but spend half the year hibernating and can live up to five years, whereas moles and voles rarely survive six months. The breeding season is July to September and there is one litter per year. Dormice require a combination of high grade food, sugar rich food and berries. Charts were shown of the necessary foods obtained from the various flowers and trees. Examples given were the oak, honeysuckle and bramble. Dormice enjoy a habitat of rich woodland and heathland scrub and finding them is almost impossible in a 3-5 hectare area. Threats to dormice are the obvious loss of woodland, a decline in woodland management and isolation of habitat. Changes in climate can affect hibernation, breeding and feeding. 'Sensitive habitat management' has some key principles - encouraging plant species, to create more hedgerows and working in partnership with landowners where various schemes are available. As with other creatures, many surveys and feeding techniques are carried out regularly; in this instance, tubes are used with wooden inserts to establish their presence. Nest boxes are used to monitor their population with the 'hole at the back'. From this, readings are taken relating to sex, weight and general condition. A National Dormouse monitoring programme was set up by various charities in 1971. Surveys in the Essex woodlands for Dormice clusters have been mixed but there have been some positive sightings since 2000.

The meeting was reminded that the Dormouse is a European protected species and therefore it is an offence to kill, injure or steal any of these creatures; in fact it is an offence to damage or destroy a site which is recognised as a breeding site or a resting place for Dormice - if this can be proven.

Bob Jenkins