

# BRITISH MAMMALS

## THE MAMMALS OF DEVON

By H. G. HURRELL

Devon has had the honour of being the venue for the first Annual Conference of the Mammal Society of the British Isles. Exeter, its county town, housed the conference and though it is not centrally placed for the country as a whole, it deserved consideration because Devon provided the Society with more members in its first year than any other county.

Devon can put forward other claims in connection with the study of mammals. The ringing of bats in this country began in 1947 at Buckfastleigh. This operation has been carried out with such remarkable success that it is becoming increasingly difficult to find unringed horseshoe bats in Devon. In years to come information should accumulate on the longevity of bats. Surprising facts about their movements were given in the last issue of *Oryx*.

I have little doubt that the pipistrelle is by far the commonest bat in Devon. The noctule is the next likeliest species to be identified on the wing, but it may well be outnumbered by the whiskered and long-eared bats. Specimens of Natterer's, Daubenton's and the Barbastelle occur from time to time, but their identification in the field is difficult and little is known of their numbers.

In recent years we have begun to dispel some of the lamentable ignorance about the status of the commonest mammals in the county. I refer, of course, to the mice, using the word to include the shrews. Intensive trapping by Mr. H. C. Woodville at the Houndspool Nurseries, Dawlish, S. Devon, to prevent serious damage to anemones, grown for cut flowers, has resulted in a catch of over 1,500 mice and shrews during the past five years. The percentage of the various species was as follows:—

			%
Wood mouse	.	.	41
Bank vole	.	.	18
Common shrew	.	.	17
Pigmy shrew	.	.	9
Field vole	.	.	7
House mouse	.	.	7
Water shrew	.	.	·8
Dormouse	.	.	3 individuals
Harvest mouse	.	.	1 individual

There are various pitfalls in assessing the relative abundance of different species in a mouse population from trapping figures

such as the above. Nevertheless, it is clear from these and other trapping figures that the bank vole is very common in Devon. The dormouse and the harvest mouse appear to be scarce and are occasionally reported from other parts of Devon. Not a single specimen of the yellow-necked mouse has yet been recorded in the county. Mr. Woodville has been at pains to familiarise himself with this species and he is certain that he has trapped none to date. Mr. Ian Linn has recently established that the wood mouse, bank vole and common shrew all inhabit the famous stunted oak wood on Dartmoor known as Wistman's Wood.

Devon has its share of the larger mammals. Some of the famous wild red deer of Exmoor live in the Devon portion of that moor. Fallow and roe deer are established in certain areas, mainly to the east. Strange to say Dartmoor is almost devoid of deer of any species. The red deer there were deliberately exterminated towards the end of the eighteenth century. This sad policy was carried out with the assistance of hounds specially loaned by the then Duke of Bedford and a great glut of venison at Okhampton and other local centres was one result.

It is feared that the polecat has been extinct for a good many years, though it survived in a few places well into the present century. About a hundred years ago a hunting enthusiast kept a small pack of hounds at Two Bridges, Dartmoor, for hunting the polecat. A correspondent writes that he was told by an aged friend that about that time otter hounds hunting in the Tavy valley occasionally pursued polecats, which sometimes eluded them by running over the top of dense furze bushes.

There is no certainty that an indigenous breeding stock of pine marten survived even to the end of the last century. Nevertheless single marten had been seen at long intervals up to the present time. The origin of these animals is uncertain in view of some escapes from fur farms since 1921. One seen near Paignton about 1918 and one shot in Somerset in 1945 were presumably wanderers from "marten country". I inspected the skin at Bristol Museum and from the short proportionate length of the tail I can state definitely that it was not a fur farm escape. All ranch-bred marten in Devon have had longer tails, in proportion to their length, than this one. Marten can evidently maintain themselves in the south-west and there is clearly a biological niche which this handsome, graceful animal could fill.

The status of foxes, badgers, otters, stoats and weasels is probably similar to many other English counties. Hares, however, are very patchy. A national service man, on a week's leave at the end of April, 1955, had four out of five successful badger watches at different selected setts two or more miles apart in a South Devon river valley. What he saw is given below because it is believed to be typical of the larger setts in Devon. Many of the smaller setts contain only single badgers.

<i>Sett.</i>	BADGERS SEEN		<i>Total.</i>
	<i>Adults.</i>	<i>Cubs.</i>	
1	2	2	4
2	2	3	5
3	4	—	4
4	—	—	—
5	2	—	2

There are still large areas free from the grey squirrel, but it has now established itself in two centres in Cornwall and is very gradually but steadily extending its range. First it seems to infiltrate with odd individuals which may appear many miles beyond its known breeding ground. It may be many years before an extension in range is consolidated. The red squirrel is present only in small numbers, even where there are no greys.

Grey seals are seen from time to time on the coasts of Devon, but I cannot find an indisputable record of the common seal.

Several species of whale have been stranded on our coasts and Dr. F. C. Fraser of the British Museum has kindly supplied particulars. The list of strandings includes: Sowerby's, pilot and Cuvier's whales, rorqual, lesser rorqual, five species of dolphin and, of course, the porpoise.

Devon can obviously claim its share of British mammals in spite of the extermination long ago of animals such as the wild cat and, more recently, the polecat.

