

BRITISH MAMMALS

THE MAMMALS OF SUFFOLK

By the EARL OF CRANBROOK

Suffolk is probably better known for its famous domestic "trinity of breeds", the Suffolk Horse, the Red Poll Cow and the Suffolk Sheep, than for its wild mammals, though some of these last are interesting as being apparently at the extreme end of their geographical range. Everywhere it is one of the most highly kept and over most of its area one of the most highly cultivated of all English counties, though there is a considerable acreage of light sandy heaths along the east coast and in the Breckland on the north western border, heaths now largely covered by the coniferous plantations of the Forestry Commission. Even on the better land there is a fairly considerable acreage of mixed deciduous woodland in private ownership, most of it planted during the first half of the nineteenth century as pheasant coverts.

With all this woodland, as would be expected and in spite of the extent of arable land, deer are not very uncommon. Fallow deer and a few red deer have been kept in various parks in the county for centuries, some inevitably escaped, and in many parts of the county small herds of feral fallow deer are well established and maintain themselves in spite of all efforts to exterminate them. Roe deer were introduced into West Suffolk some sixty years ago and these too have become well established in the State Forests, while red deer and muntjac are reported from just over the Norfolk border. Two muntjac were seen in East Suffolk in 1953, while red and fallow deer turn up at intervals over most of the county. Such red deer as do occur seem mainly to be escaped "carted" deer, though hinds have turned up out of the blue, and have attracted to themselves a wandering stag to breed. Wherever there is woodland, there will deer of some sort appear and maintain themselves if unmolested.

In lowland districts the presence or absence of foxes depends almost entirely on social conventions. There are packs of foxhounds in South and West Suffolk, harriers in the east and north: until comparatively recently the distribution of foxes was more or less co-terminous with the country hunted by the various packs of foxhounds, and vulpicide a rare crime elsewhere—rare for lack of victims only and when committed carrying no social stigma. In spite of constant persecution the badger seems always just to have held its own. At the beginning

of this century the late G. T. Rope wrote in the *Victoria County History*, "the badger can no longer be included in the list of Suffolk mammals," but then goes on to give a list of captures which seems to indicate that even in those much kept days badgers must have been breeding here and there in the county. The same was true up to the end of the 1930's, every year or so the capture of a badger would be reported in the local press, even from outside the fox-hunting part of the county, where badgers obviously had a better chance of survival. Of recent years the status of both fox and badger has been radically altered by the activities of the Forestry Commission. Somewhat unwilling providers of a sanctuary for deer, the Commissioners welcome badgers and foxes, both of which have increased in numbers over the last twenty years, while it is to be hoped that a pine marten which was reliably reported in East Suffolk a year or two back found the same refuge. Apart from this single specimen the last known pine martens and polecats were killed in the 1880's. Of the other carnivores, the otter is not uncommon while the stoat and weasel have always held their own even when keepers were thicker on the ground than they are to-day. It has been reported by a number of keepers that in 1955 fewer pregnant or nursing female stoats were killed than in normal years, fewer young were seen and indeed that there were fewer stoats than usual generally. It is suggested that this may be an aftermath of myxomatosis.

Little is known of the county's bats: the pipistrelle, noctule and long-eared bats are common everywhere while the serotine seems to be not uncommon around Lowestoft—probably reported only from there because for thirty or forty years there have been field naturalists with an interest in bats living in or near that town: the serotine has recently been reported from mid-Suffolk purely by chance since a single specimen captured in a house happened to fall into the hands of someone competent to recognize it. Daubenton's, Natterer's and whiskered bats have been reported from caves in the chalk in West Suffolk and, with the barbastelle, from other parts of the county. Like the report of *Myotis dasycneme*, Boie, from the Stour valley (*Zoologist* 1887, p. 162) some of the above records need verification.

All the insectivores, hedgehog, mole, and common, pigmy and water shrews are found throughout the county and call for no comment, save for wonder at the fecundity of the hedgehog. For years this animal has been persecuted by keepers: it is easily trapped, often found and brought to hand by dogs, while judging by the numbers seen dead on the roads many must be

killed by motor cars—and yet its numbers seem never to decrease.

The distribution of some of the rodents is interesting. The grey squirrel, common for many years in Essex, Herts and Cambridgeshire seems unable to get farther east. Between 1947 and 1952 a few were shot in the west of the county but before and since that date there are no reliable records. Reports of “grey squirrels” are it is true not uncommon but the red squirrel can look very grey and to those who have not seen *S. carolinensis*—and few in Suffolk have—a grey-coloured squirrel is often a Grey-Squirrel. After having been sent several grey-coloured *S. vulgaris*, one is loath to accept reports of grey squirrels without handling the corpse. The red squirrel is not uncommon and is widely distributed. The natural distribution of the dormouse seems to stop at the Essex-Suffolk border. A number were released in the late nineteenth century at Geldeston, on the Norfolk border, and for some years apparently maintained themselves and even spread. No trace of the animal can now be found there and so far as Suffolk is concerned it seems now to be confined to the Stour valley, though some older reports speak of it as extending all over the southern half of the county. The yellow-necked mouse (*Apodemus flavicollis*) which in England seems, like the dormouse, to have a southern and western distribution is found throughout the county and in Essex, Herts and Cambridgeshire, but does not seem to extend into Norfolk nor to the Fens and Breckland. Elsewhere in Suffolk it is found, scattered amongst the general population of the ubiquitous long-tailed field mouse, in woods, hedgerows, gardens and not infrequently in apple-stores, pantries, and even churches and beehives. The harvest mouse is not uncommon, is frequently seen in corn stacks when threshing and has been caught along the coast on saltings covered at high spring tides. Its nests are found in cornfields, hedges and in the reeds along the edges of fen ditches. Bank and field voles are common, as are the brown rat and house mouse: it seems possible that Suffolk has a larger “field” population of these last two than other counties. The water vole too is common in suitable situations everywhere. As is well known black specimens are said to be more common in the Fens than elsewhere in England, a statement repeated in book after book and by naturalist after naturalist, but so far as I am aware these Fen water voles have never seriously been investigated. As is usual one or two towns have a few black rats. The coypu is now well established along the River Waveney on the Norfolk border, has

been reported from the Fens and seems gradually to be spreading over the county. Apart from mink—one was recently killed thirty or forty miles from the nearest fur farm—it has no enemies save man, but the skin is valuable and the flesh can be sold to catering establishments: it is said to be much harried at night by poachers in duck punts armed with rifles and electric torches. Hares are common everywhere. In West Suffolk there is some evidence of a seasonal migration amongst hares and that they leave the Fens for the high ground in the winter, returning in the spring. In the 1870's some Irish hares (*L. timidus*) were released on some grazing marshes near the coast of East Suffolk. At first they bred freely and spread to neighbouring parishes but later died out and none were living by the end of the century. It was said that the young were less able to look after themselves than those of the common hare, a number being found drowned in the marsh ditches. Rabbits seem now (April, 1956) to be increasing in numbers in spite of every effort to exterminate them, apparently "lying out" more often than living in burrows. There is no evidence of any increase in damage done by foxes or other predators deprived of what was said to be their normal prey, though stories of strange happenings spread rapidly. Stoats are said to have killed more of the young of ground nesting or hedgerow-nesting birds—a statement which seems to be in everybody's mouth and yet no one can be found who has seen more stoats than usual in thrushes' or nightingales' nests, while keepers report a general shortage of stoats (see above) and no abnormal lack of pheasants and partridges. In fact myxomatosis seems to have affected human beings as much psychologically as it did rabbits physically. Some, following one of the most favourable seasons for years, attribute all the extra yield of crops and grass to the absence of rabbits; others, deprived of sport or of the sight of rabbits playing by the woodside, ascribe every missing hen or robbed nest to a rabbit-hungry fox or stoat.

Of the sea mammals the common seal breeds in quantities in the Wash and every year a few individuals are seen in our estuaries. Porpoises are often seen along the coast: of 26 strandings reported since 1913, 13 took place in August, September and October. Both the bottle-nosed and white-beaked dolphins have been reported some half dozen times since 1913, while occasional specimens of several of the larger whales have occurred at very infrequent intervals: they cannot be said to be part of the county's fauna.

Inevitably an article such as this is made up of a series of bald

statements based on insufficient evidence. Little work has been done on the mammals of the county and in general they are only noticed and reported when they advertise themselves by their depredations. Where anybody takes or can be persuaded to take the trouble to look or trap, there will be found, for example, voles, water shrews and probably yellow-necked mice, but no grey squirrels or dormice; one can only assume that the same is true of the rest of the county and hope for more workers in this field to fill the many gaps in our knowledge.

SHORT NOTE

ROE DEER AND ERGOT

The suggestion put forward by Major Anthony Buxton that roe deer are attracted to their ringed areas in Scotland by the presence of ergotised grasses, seems to ignore the fact that rings have frequently been found in areas elsewhere where it has been shown quite conclusively that such infection does not exist.

I have been assured by competent Cambridge botanists that *Claviceps purpurea* is a rare plant in the Brecklands of Norfolk. Specimens of vegetation which I collected there from roe deer rings, and which were examined by the same skilled botanist at the Norwich Castle Museum to whom Major Buxton submitted his plants, were all reported free of the infestation. Since the disease is, however, very widespread in Scotland, it is exceedingly likely that any roe deer ring would encircle grasses parasitized in this fashion. It is improbable therefore that the deer would need to demarcate areas of this fungus by their rings.

Roe failed to establish themselves in Epping Forest after their introduction in 1884. Ergot exists in abundance in the Forest according to the Essex Field Club. One would have thought that were it a primary requirement in their lives, roe would have settled there more effectively than they did.

I have frequently found roe rings in areas where grasses are entirely absent—in heather, and under trees in pine woods, for example. Many of these rings were used as play rings by the doe and her kids. The one shown in *Oryx*, Vol. III, No. 4, most certainly was. Wild chases took place there in late June and early July. Some observers have witnessed these play activities even earlier than I.