

Case Study

The dormice of Fingle Woods

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A groundbreaking partnership to transform ancient Fingle Woods in Devon could also change the fortunes of the rare hazel dormouse.

In 2014 and in the first venture of its kind between the Woodland Trust and the National Trust, work began to gradually restore the 825 acre site at Fingle Woods from maturing conifer back to native broadleaves. From the point that restoration commenced it was important to find a way to work sensitively to protect and enhance the habitat of the existing dormice living and breeding in Fingle Woods.

In the first year of the project, an initial survey was carried out to find out about the dormouse activity. The survey led to a number of steps being taken during year two:

Dormouse presence and activity were monitored in three specific areas – Cod Wood meadow, Upperton Weir and Fingle Woods south and National Dormouse Monitoring Programme (NDMP) nest boxes were set up in these areas.

Habitat assessment continued for tell-tale gnawed nut shells and nests within the woodland.

Opportunities were taken to train volunteers and ecologists in monitoring the dormice.

“As Fingle Woods transitions from commercial forestry to a more sensitively managed and wildlife-friendly woodland, there is a lot of habitat work going on. I was able to work with the National Trust and the Woodland Trust team to take advantage of this and look at the effect of tree removal for habitat improvement on hazel dormice.”

Cecily Goodwin, PhD student

In addition, a PhD student from the University of Exeter, Cecily Goodwin, worked with the Woodland Trust, as part of her research project, to look at how the dormice would react to forestry work and the thinning of conifers. An area by Upperton Weir was used as the main focus of the study and dormice were tagged, then radio-tracked over two weeks. Some interesting initial findings emerged:

- Dormice used the broadleaved area as expected but radio-tracking showed they spent a significant amount of time feeding in conifers and piles of brash.
- Nesting appeared to take place in the broadleaved area where longer strips of fibrous nest material were more available.
- Nests were not found in the conifer area but were common in the transition area between the conifer and broadleaves.

Key Facts

- Dormice (*Muscardinus avellanarius*) are a protected species and legal responsibility for their protection falls on the woodland manager.
- As work on Fingle Woods began, all contractors were given a method statement so they could understand and consider how they needed to work to protect the dormouse habitats during the forestry works.
- A work programme was developed to enhance habitats around the dormouse strongholds, with dormice considered during timber extraction work.
- By using low impact methods such as employing small-scale contractors, using horses to extract timber and restricting movements of forest machinery, dormouse habitats and adjacent areas could be managed with the least possible disruption.

Upperton Weir

This is a mixed deciduous area adjacent to an area of immature planted conifers, primarily Douglas fir. The work plan in this area required the use of hand-felling methods to thin the conifers, which reduced damage to delicate nesting habitats and ground flora. Nest boxes were put in during mid-summer and were occupied immediately. Signs indicated two litters of young were reared, feeding on wild cherries - an early season food source.



Tagged dormouse

Fingle Woods south

This is a higher altitude site where a good hazel/shrub area stood adjacent to a dense Douglas fir plantation in need of thinning. Evidence showed the dormice moved through the conifers to find occasional stranded hazel shrubs so nest boxes were put in the shrubby area and across the road in a strip of hazel/old oak hedge. Nest boxes were also put in an area of hazel-dominated woodland alongside a stream. Work included cutting back the Douglas fir edge and thinning by hand, using small-scale contractors. Extraction took place by using a small winch tractor to limit disturbance to the ground flora. Connections in the canopy were maintained at all times for dormouse access.

Cod Wood – Ross Meadow and other areas of Fingle Woods

Dense birch and small conifer regeneration were removed from an area that, decades ago, was a meadow. Work licensed by Natural England was carried out in stages to minimise damage to hibernating dormice. Now the meadow is restored the dormice have moved to adjacent broadleaved woodland, using nest boxes there.

A section of hazel hedge which had become thin and sparse due to overshadowing from the adjacent Douglas fir plantation was laid to reinvigorate its growth, providing a connective habitat for the dormice.

Where conifer thinning work was imminent a planning application was needed to put in an extraction track through the plantation. A design statement was written for the Conservation of Ecology and Heritage and specified:

- Avoid damaging good dormouse habitat
- Restrict movement of forestry vehicles to less sensitive areas
- Protect and translocate features of wildlife value such as old tree stumps

Matt Parkins, who has been monitoring the dormice at Fingle Woods for the past year, said: "It's really interesting to see a population of dormice over a full season and observe their behaviours and feeding habits. Though a lot of hard work has been going on, the Fingle dormice have had a successful breeding season and I'm looking forward to finding out how they get on through the coming year. It looks like variable weather conditions may be creating more problems for dormice than the carefully managed woodland restoration work."

How the Trust can help

Bringing damaged ancient woodland back into prime condition requires careful management. Thanks to funding from the Heritage Lottery Fund, the Woodland Trust is offering landowners and managers professional support and training to sustainably manage and restore their woodlands.

If you own a plantation on ancient woodland site, we can help you discover its history and provide independent and practical advice on topics including:

- How restoration can complement your woodland business and interests
- How restoration can support forestry certification
- Making the most of grant funding

FOR MORE INFORMATION CONTACT:
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The experience and learning gained during the first two years of restoration along with the continued dormice observations will help to inform future management activity. Monitoring the dormice on current NDMP sites will continue with informal (non NDMP) surveys along connective habitats. Reporting will also continue to contribute to an Exeter University PhD study into dormouse hibernation. Engagement with local people will continue with opportunities to develop further training for dormouse handlers and volunteers and to share information of the conservation work with Fingle Woods' many visitors.



Horse logging