

BRITISH MAMMALS

MAMMALS IN HAMPSHIRE

By P. H. CARNE

In the New Forest alone, Hampshire possesses what is potentially one of the finest mammal sanctuaries in the southern half of Britain. Hampshire as a whole contains a greater proportion of woodland, acre for acre, than any other English county except neighbouring Sussex. Since woodland is, perhaps, the most important single ecological factor controlling the incidence and abundance of mammals in Great Britain, it is not altogether surprising that Hampshire's mammals are many in number and varied in species.

With the exception of strictly montane and localized forms, and relict species such as the wild cat, pine marten and polecat, almost all the British land mammals are represented in the county. There are also at least three introduced species living wild and one of these, the grey squirrel, has since the decrease of rabbits, assumed the doubtful distinction of being the most frequently seen wild mammal in Hampshire. The municipal gardens at Bournemouth are the only place in the county where grey squirrels are known to have been intentionally introduced. They have spread out many miles, not only from here, but from Surrey and Sussex, whence the county was invaded in force in the early 1930's.

Red squirrels were still fairly common in my own village, near Southampton, as late as 1941, when greys first arrived from the north-east. For a time both species occurred, apparently happily, side by side, but only once did I actually see the two kinds together. I had paused to watch a red squirrel in a wood by a busy road when a solitary grey came along and entered the tree where the red was sitting. The red chattered helplessly and loudly from aloft until the grey, which completely ignored it, had passed on well out of view. Red squirrels, I well recall, were an everyday sight in the New Forest until 1942 and even later. Within seven years of the first grey squirrel being killed in the New Forest in 1940, the alien species had colonized the whole of south-west Hampshire. The numbers annually killed now amount to thousands. Red squirrels, on the other hand, are almost extinct in the Forest, being reduced to perhaps a dozen individuals all told. Only in the Isle of Wight, which greys have never reached, are red squirrels still to be found as plentifully as ever.

At present rabbits are fewest in downland areas, both on the mainland and in the Island, where the effects of myxomatosis were felt most severely. Areas such as the New Forest and the lowlands of south-east Hampshire, where rabbit numbers, prior to myxomatosis, were relatively small, have been less affected by the disease.

Neither in the Isle of Wight nor on the mainland have hares so far shown signs of any notable increase as a result of myxomatosis. Always most plentiful in the chalky regions, hares are scarce and very local in the southern Hampshire lowlands where there is, however, some evidence of numerical fluctuations from season to season.

Water-voles are common along the Itchen, Test and Avon, where they may often be watched in broad daylight. On the New Forest streams, however, they are scarce. Bank-voles, field-voles and the various shrews and mice are all well-represented. The harvest-mouse has lately shown signs of recovering lost ground, but the dormouse is almost a rarity now in Hampshire and on the Island.

The New Forest was one of the first known English haunts of the rare Bechstein's bat, and all the other British species, from the noctule to the pipistrelle, have at one time or another been recorded in the county.

Foxes are perhaps not quite so plentiful now in the New Forest as they were immediately after the second World War, when I rarely went walking in the area without seeing at least one abroad by day. They are abundant enough, however, all over the mainland, and during the winter of 1954-5 several were seen in built-up areas of Southampton. Foxes appear to have been absent from the Isle of Wight until the early nineteenth century, when some were introduced for hunting, but about fifty years ago the Island was swept by a mange epidemic. Numbers slowly recovered and foxes to-day are scarcely fewer in the Isle of Wight than they are on the mainland.

Badgers are said to have become extinct in the Isle of Wight towards the close of the nineteenth century. At a later date, however, some were imported from the mainland, and not long ago I had the rather gratifying experience of watching a badger emerge from the set, on the downs south-east of Godshill, where the last of the native Island badgers is said to have been killed. Although it has long enjoyed rather special renown as a haunt of badgers, the New Forest is perhaps less densely peopled by these creatures than are some of the nearby agricultural areas of the county. There are sets in most of the woods along the Test

and Itchen valleys and they are particularly abundant in the Hamble River valley, between Botley and Bishop's Waltham. Most of the southern Hampshire sets are sited close to streams, but on the chalk there are many old-established earths well away from water.

My only view of a Hampshire otter was on the Itchen which, like the Avon and the Test, has several pairs. So have the New Forest streams and the coastal inlets; otters are also fairly frequent visitors to the Isle of Wight's inland waters. Stoats and weasels are hardly less common than before the days of the gin-trap. Polecats survived in the New Forest until the early years of this century and the pine marten died out less than a hundred years ago.

Red deer are present in small numbers in the south-east of the New Forest and until recently one old stag, which I encountered on several occasions, survived from a herd which at one time roamed the northern margin of the Forest. Fallow deer are still plentiful enough to be observed with little effort in the central and northern New Forest. There are a few also at large near Hackwood Park, in Harewood Forest, and in the large woods bordering Wiltshire, Berkshire and Sussex. It is also possible that a remnant of the ancient forest herd survives in the woods of Alice Holt, between Alton and Farnham.

Roe are widespread in the New Forest, but there are relatively few where fallow also occur. Other haunts of roe are the pine plantations near Bramshill in northern Hampshire, Alice Holt Forest, Woolmer Forest and elsewhere adjoining Surrey and Sussex.

Chinese water deer were formerly kept in a fenced enclosure on Lord Portsmouth's property at Farleigh Wallop, from which a few contrived to escape to form a feral breeding colony. Japanese sika deer, released fifty years ago on the Beaulieu estate, have also spread to certain woods in the New Forest where their numbers are such as to call for fairly frequent and stringent control.

The common seal is occasionally seen in Southampton Water, but the only marine mammal which is at all frequent is the porpoise. Schools of these come up to the mouth of the Test with the high spring-tides, and I have watched them well within fifty yards of the dock-wall at Southampton. Having regard to the volume of traffic on Hampshire's seaways, it is astonishing that even so humble a cetacean as the porpoise survives there at all.