

The Wood Mouse by Colin Varndell

The mouse you are most likely to encounter in west Dorset is the native wood mouse. Wood mice in general are not gregarious, and live mainly solitary lives. Although the wood mouse is characteristic of woodland habitats, it has learned to colonise farmland, hedgerows, gardens and human dwellings. It is a highly adaptable and opportunistic mammal, and will readily enter buildings in search of food and shelter. It has a collapsible rib cage, allowing the animal to squeeze through narrow cracks when it needs to. In winter, wood mice may become temporarily gregarious and sometimes nest overnight in groups for warmth, in order to increase their chances of survival.

The wood mouse can be distinguished from the house mouse by its chestnut-coloured upperparts, significantly larger ears, bulging eyes and white or off-white belly, chin and feet (house mice are light-chestnut all over in summer and grey in winter, lacking the paler underparts at all times).

The wood mouse is strictly nocturnal in its habits and is rarely seen in daytime. In the wild, these agile animals live in complex underground burrows, which they tunnel in the earth beneath leaf litter or in hedgerow banks. The untidy nest is usually made with well-weathered leaves, and is a disorderly, loose construction.

The diet consists of mainly seeds, nuts, fruit, fungi and small invertebrates. Their favourite foods are tree seeds, when these are plentiful on the ground, wood mice carry them off for storage. If food is readily available, wood mice can continue to breed well into the winter months.

More usually, the breeding season is from February to October, when females become highly territorial. A female in season may be mated with several different males, scientifically referred to as 'Scramble competition' resulting in multiple paternity litters. Juvenile wood mice reach sexual maturity at two months, so young of the year are capable of breeding from that age.

Males are solitary animals and are not territorial, but do occupy home ranges. A male's home range is twice the area of that of a female. The reasons for the larger home range, is that males are bigger than females and therefore require more resources. Also, during summer months, males range further in search of sexually receptive females.

Wood mice have many predators including both tawny and barn owl, fox, weasel, stoat, adder and of course the domestic cat. If life is not curtailed by predation, wood mice have a maximum life expectancy of around 20 months.

Recent ground-breaking research published by BMC Ecology April 2003 found that wood mice use visually conspicuous objects as way-marks to assist their spatial orientation. It was found that this method of way-marking served as an aid to navigation during exploration, particularly on return journeys.

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