

## The Harvest Mouse (*Micromys minutus*)



Julian Jones

The harvest mouse has traditionally been associated with arable fields, but recent surveys, including those in Cheshire, South Yorkshire and Derbyshire, have revealed that this tiny mammal is just as likely to be found in wetland habitats such as reedbeds and in rough grassland, including that on roadside verges and motorway embankments. In Wales, harvest mice have been found in areas of ungrazed moorland and in *Molinia* grassland on bogs, though all harvest mouse records collected during a national survey (1970) came from land under 500 feet. Members of Sorby Natural History Society, Derbyshire Mammal Group and Derbyshire Wildlife Trust have searched for old summer nests in Derbyshire and discovered populations at several sites in the east and south of the county, for example at Carr Vale and Peter Fidler Nature Reserves in the Doe Lea Valley and at sites in the Erewash and Trent valleys. In the Peak District, the harvest mouse is known from only a couple of sites in the Calver area. It is an under recorded mammal in the county however, and it is likely that there are more sites waiting to be discovered.

### Distribution and status

The harvest mouse is widely distributed from western Europe east to Japan, with 16 sub-species identified. In Europe harvest mice are absent from Norway and most of Spain, Italy and Sweden. There is evidence that harvest mice have been present in Britain since the third century A.D., but it is unclear whether they are truly native or a post glacial introduction, possibly associated with agricultural activities. A 1970 UK survey concluded that the harvest mouse was more commonly found in southern and eastern areas of England, and it was said to be 'rare' in the 'west midlands' which included Derbyshire. Harvest mice are thought to be declining and remain vulnerable to intensive agriculture, loss of rough grassland through housing and industrial developments and unsympathetic grass cutting regimes. It is now thought likely that wetlands were the species' original habitat and that loss of wetland habitats may have precipitated a widespread decline of the species in Europe.

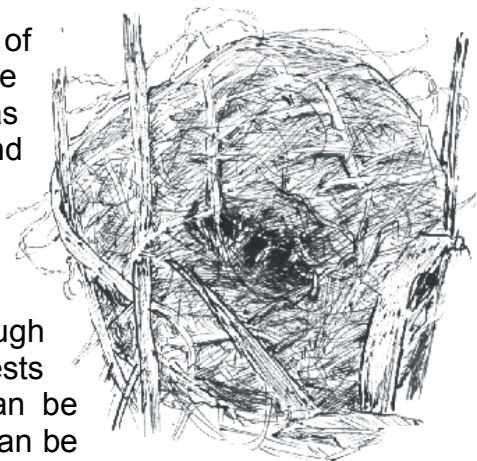
Weighing in at only 4-6g and measuring 5-7cm head-body with a tail around the same length, the harvest mouse is the smallest European rodent. It is more rounded in appearance than other species of British mice, with a rather blunt face, small hairy ears and small dark eyes. The underparts are white and clearly demarcated from the orange-russet upper parts. The harvest mouse is well adapted for climbing through vegetation, with a prehensile tail, light skeleton, flexible legs and feet and a large outer toe on its hind foot.

Harvest mice have excellent hearing and a good sense of balance but their eyesight is poor. They are vulnerable to predation by stoats, weasels, foxes, domestic cats, toads and birds such as owls, crows, pheasants and blackbirds.

The harvest mouse's Latin name *Micromys minutus* is derived from *Micros* meaning small, *mys* meaning mouse and *minutus* meaning tiny: it is 'the smallest tiny mouse'

## Searching for summer nests

The harvest mouse is the only British mouse to build nests of grass well above ground. Summer nests are woven between the stalks of grasses, reeds, rushes and other plants and can be as low as a few centimetres above the ground in short grasses and up to a metre high in tall reeds. Nests are spherical and vary from golf ball to cricket ball size, with breeding nests usually measuring 6-10 cm. Pregnant females build nests at night by shredding and weaving grass leaves, which remain attached to the stalk, and then lining the nest by pulling other leaves through the outer wall. Entrance holes only become obvious when nests have been abandoned. These abandoned summer nests can be searched for during winter when they are easier to find. Nests can be found in grass and reed species such as common reed *Phragmites australis*, reed canary grass *Phalaris arundinacea*, cocksfoot grass *Dactylis glomerata*, false oat grass *Arrhenatherum elatius*, tufted hair grass *Deschampsia cespitosa* and soft rush *Juncus effusus*.



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Harvest mice have two or three litters of young each year between May and October or even December in mild conditions. An average of six young are born per litter. Young are independent after about sixteen days when they are abandoned by the mother who will build a new nest for her next litter. Mortality of young is high and most harvest mice do not live beyond the age of six months. Like other rodents, harvest mice appear to be subject to cycles of abundance.

## Harvest mice in winter

As vegetation dies back in winter, harvest mice abandon the stalk zone and use the ground level runs and tunnels of other small mammals. They may migrate from marshy areas to drier sites and build nests at the base of grass tussocks.

The harvest mouse usually feeds on seeds, berries and insects, but will also eat fungi, roots and moss. It may leave sickle shaped slivers of seeds at feeding sites, but these are difficult to find due to their small size, as are harvest mouse droppings which measure only 2mm.

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## Protecting harvest mice in Derbyshire: what can you do?

- Look out for signs of harvest mice, and contact the Wildlife Trust if you know of any places where harvest mice occur or used to occur.
- Encourage your local council to leave some areas of tall grassland along road verges and around the edges of parks, especially during spring-autumn.
- If you own or manage land it may be possible to alter mowing regimes, restore or create wetland habitats or re-instate former hedge lines to provide refuge areas for harvest mice. Financial support may be available through local and national agri-environment schemes. Contact us for further information and advice.
- Join Derbyshire Wildlife Trust: your support will help us to manage our nature reserves to benefit harvest mice.

Derbyshire Wildlife Trust Tel: 01773 881188 [www.derbyshirewildlifetrust.org.uk](http://www.derbyshirewildlifetrust.org.uk)  
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