

## Mystery nests in the garden near Wyre Forest.

Rosemary Winnall.

I spent 29<sup>th</sup> March 2020 clearing the banks of our small garden stream (01 & 02) at Bliss Gate, south of the Wyre Forest. Normally these banks are strimmed in late winter, but as the Lady's Smock plants were starting to flower, I took extra care and cut the dead stems by hand. I was working on a dense clump of Reed Canary-grass *Phalaris arundinacea* (03) when on the ground, I came across two circular nests like extra-large cricket balls, and I couldn't think what had made them.



01. Small stream, Willow Bank 16 June 2005. Rosemary Winnall.



02. Streamside vegetation, Willow Bank, 26 May 2019. Rosemary Winnall.



03. Reed canary-grass cleared where the nests were found, Willow Bank. Rosemary Winnall.

The nests were about 12cms across and the outer layer was made of tightly woven Reed Canary-grass leaves (04). When I made a small opening to look inside, I could see that they were filled with a dense layer of fine grasses.



04. Dormouse nest from *Phalaris* bed Willow Bank. Rosemary Winnall.

Several garden birds make round nests, namely Wrens, Chiffchaffs and Long-tailed Tits but I knew what these looked like and immediately discounted them. Then I thought of water mammals like Water Shrew and Water Vole, but I knew they lived in burrows. The nests looked too small for a rat and too large for a mouse, vole, Common Shrew or Harvest Mouse (05).



05. Harvest mouse nest (right) and Dormouse nest (left) showing size difference. 30<sup>th</sup> March 2020. Rosemary Winnall.

I consulted mammologist Professor Stephen Harris and he suggested that they may have been made by a Dormouse, and he himself had found nests in Reed Canary-grass in the past, especially where the grass was mixed with brambles and thistles. Dormice are known for being arboreal inhabitants of woodland, living up in the tree canopy where they forage for food including hazel nuts and fruits. Their nests are constructed from peeled honeysuckle bark, and these can be found in various situations especially woodland coppice but they will also readily use specially constructed nest-boxes.

Last year I read the fascinating book *Living with the Dormouse* (Eden 2009) and learned that there is so much more to the fascinating lives of this small mammals. Sue Eden found Dormice nests in bramble scrub, gorse thickets, cut hedges, reed beds, pampas grass in someone's garden, salt-sprayed coastal scrub, places with not a woodland in sight.

In our garden we had recorded a Dormouse on 13<sup>th</sup> December 1998 during a spell of mild weather, when our cat had alerted us to one up

in a shrub near our bird feeders. As a result, Phil Rudlin Wildlife Ranger with the Forestry Commission and holder of a Dormouse licence had helped us to put up a few Dormouse boxes along our hedgerows. During the next few years we had occasionally found evidence of a nest in one or two of these boxes but when the nest boxes began to deteriorate we had not replaced them. The garden on the south side of the Wyre Forest is half a mile from the nearest woodland and has a network of mature old hedgerows. Had the Dormice used these hedges to access our garden? Perhaps Dormice don't even need hedges as corridors to move between sites.

It is thought that dormice are under-recorded, and if Dormice don't need trees, hazel nuts or honeysuckle bark, it is possible that some of us are living closer to Dormice than we'd imagined.

### Reference

Eden, S. 2009. *Living with the Dormouse The Common Dormouse: Real Rodent or Phantom of the Ancient Wood?* Papadakis Publishing, London.

### Images

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