

Wheatfen's Woodland Mammals

David Nobbs, 2004

The dry woodland at Wheatfen forms part of Surlingham Wood, which has an undercover of brambles and bracken. There is very little ground flora since historically the wood only dates back to about 1750. Management of this area involves the felling of dangerous trees which could otherwise fall across footpaths. Only a small amount of wood is used for fuel, the rest is left to decay. A small area of hazel is coppiced. Tuck's Wood, which abuts Surlingham Wood, is identified by a boundary ditch and is effectively a later continuation of Surlingham Wood. The woods cover a total area of about 12 hectares. Tuck's Wood has no management and many fallen trees from past gales litter the wood. Access is difficult with neither rides nor footpaths. Both woods are fringed by open arable fields on the western side.

Mammals in the woodland are numerous. Roe deer graze in the fields and dry woodland. In winter they feed on brambles. Their population size is difficult to estimate. Chinese water deer, which have been at Wheatfen since the mid-70s, can be seen frequently in both woods, especially during times of tidal flooding when they migrate to the higher ground. In severe weather they graze ivy hanging from fallen boughs. Their simple stomach system enables them to obtain enough nutrient value from this poisonous plant to make a good supplement to their diet. It has been observed that sugar beet tops left from harvesting provide a good food source in the winter. It may be a surprise but as yet the small muntjac deer has not been recorded at Wheatfen. Probably there is insufficient woodland area to support them as well as roe and Chinese water deer.

Foxes can also be seen and scent is often detected along the pathways, although no earths have been discovered yet. Pheasant and woodcock in the wood are likely food sources, and dead deer are soon eaten and their carcasses carried off.

The invasion of the grey squirrel at Wheatfen began in the early seventies with the complete loss of the red squirrel population. Ted Ellis recorded this in February 1985 ('In The Countryside', Eastern Daily Press).

Since their invasion grey squirrels have spread into the fens and carrs. Damage to the Wheatfen Cottage has been a problem with them since each year they take up residence in the roof space. The damage to plastic dustbins can be quite severe. In very bad winters bark can be stripped off willow trees. Grey squirrels maintain high numbers throughout the year at Wheatfen.

Rabbits have their burrows on the side of the wood in light soils and the population remains steady through predation by foxes, weasels and stoats. The rabbits do some damage in bad winters by stripping and gnawing small trees close to ground level.

Hares live in the adjoining fields and they have been observed coming into the woods in bad winters to chew bark.

Hedgehogs have an ideal habitat close to the woods as a large area of grass provides earthworms, beetles etc. The woodland edge provides leaf litter for bedding during hibernation.

Brown rats frequent the buildings and sheds and can grow to quite a size. Rats can also be observed alongside ditches and dykes. Population densities at Wheatfen remain small.

The woodland habitats at Wheatfen are ideal for stoats with good food sources in rabbits, rodents and birds. Even with dykes running through parts of the woods, stoats move freely throughout the habitat since they are good swimmers. Whilst stoats in Britain rely mainly on rabbits as their primary food source, in Europe water voles form the major food. Wheatfen is an important refuge for water voles so it can be assumed that stoats exploit this food source as well as preying on rabbits. Ted Ellis reported in 1956 a stoat using an old mossy willow in Home Marsh, with a hole under the roots and dung on the bough. Sightings are infrequent and densities difficult to estimate. The smaller weasel is more commonly seen as it scampers quickly across the paths and rides. They are constantly active with their need to eat 25% of their body weight daily. Their main food sources are voles, mice, small rats and rabbits.

Moles prefer the drier parts of the woodland and the grassy areas around the cottage where there

is a plentiful supply of food.

The smaller mammal populations consist of the house mouse, wood mouse, yellow-necked mouse, field vole, bank vole, common shrew and pygmy shrew. The house mouse resides mainly in Wheatfen Cottage and the adjacent buildings. The yellow-necked mouse was first recorded when a female was discovered at Wheatfen in 1984. This species resembles a wood mouse but has a characteristic yellow crossed collar on the chest. They occupy the woodland herbaceous habitats and woodland glades. They are very agile and can be found climbing high into bushes. They also like to raid apple stores. The distribution of the yellow-necked mouse is mainly on a line south of the Norfolk-Suffolk border and they are probably spreading in the county. The population size at Wheatfen is unknown at present and a survey study would be a worthwhile project.

The woodmouse is Britain's most widespread mammal. Trapping is the only way to estimate numbers since they are nocturnal creatures. At Wheatfen the woods and garden provide ideal habitats.

Bank voles are active by day and night in the woodland rides where bramble thickets give good cover. Feeding is on seed, fruit buds and leaves; the species can be confused with the field vole but their long tail (up to 11cm) is a distinguishing feature. The populations are good.

Field voles frequent the woodland alongside the bank voles, but they can also be found on the very marshy ground with succulent grass stems providing their main diet. They have a liking for young trees which by intensive gnawing of the bark causes the small trees to die.

Common shrews are busy creatures with a need to find food every few hours to survive. Their presence is not immediately obvious unless trapping is done as they spend much of their time in the undergrowth searching for food - earthworms, woodlice and spiders. They can be found in drier surface vegetation and beneath fallen trees.

The pygmy shrew is Britain's smallest mammal; individual weights varying between 2.4 and 6.1 grams. The species is less common than the common shrew but has similar habitat and diet requirements. Dead animals are often found due to their short life span and high metabolic rate.

A mammal which roosts in the roof of Wheatfen cottage is the pipistrelle bat. This is Britain's smallest bat and can frequently be seen at dusk flying along the woodland edges and across the fens in search of moths. Noctule bats were reported flying over Wheatfen in April 1952.