



The survey

Thank you for taking part in this Harvest Mouse Survey. The aim of this survey is to gather in more records and determine the current range and distribution of the harvest mouse within Worcestershire.

The results of this survey will also give us further insight into the habitats and vegetation used by harvest mice.

The harvest mouse is a diminutive rodent, at only 5-8 g in weight on average and approximately 6 cm long, plus a tail of similar length. It tends to be nocturnal for most of the year, only coming out in the daytime during winter, when the low night-time temperatures put harvest mice off venturing out for food at night. For these reasons, this survey will encompass searching for the most distinctive signs of harvest mice, their nests, rather than the animals themselves.

As a volunteer you are under no obligation to carry out this survey and can cease taking part in the survey at any point. When carrying out any survey outside, especially on land unknown to you, safety is an important consideration. Your safety is your responsibility and you are advised never to put yourself or others in a position that could be dangerous. To this effect, in order to maximise your enjoyment from taking part in this survey: PLEASE READ THE RISK ASSESSMENT FORM.

Check list

Use the following checklist to make sure you have everything you need. This list may seem long, but most items are things you would normally take with you for a walk in the countryside.

- Appropriate OS map to locate your site
- Letter explaining the survey in case you are asked
- Notebook, or supply of survey forms, and pencil
- Measuring tape (for measuring size of nest and height above ground)
- Mobile phone (if you have one)
- Grass identification sheet, FCS chart or a book, if you have one

- Stout walking stick if the site is known to lie wet and or near water
- Wellies or other suitable footwear (the sites may be wet or damp)
- Waterproofs
- Towel and spare set of warm clothing in case you get wet
- First Aid kit
- Bottle of clean water for washing hands and or anti-bacterial hand cleaning gel
- A camera is useful to take photographs of any nests found, for your own reference

What to look for

The characteristic breeding nests of harvest mice provide obvious signs of their presence and are unlikely to be confused with other types of nest. They also tend to stand out more in winter when the surrounding vegetation dies back.

Nests can vary in size from 10cm in diameter for breeding nests to only 5cm for non-breeding nests (cricket ball to golf ball-sized).

Nests are built from the leaves of plants, which have been shredded lengthways into strips 1-2mm wide, with the strips remaining joined at the base of the leaf. The strips are then woven together to form the framework of the nest, with other leaves sometimes also being bound into the wall. The leaves that are used to build the nest are left attached to the plant so that they support the nest.

The nest is lined by finely shredded grass or thistle down. Whilst in use there will be no obvious entrance as the mouse closes the hole after passing through. However, once the nest has been abandoned, there may be a conspicuous hole.

If in doubt as to whether the nest was built by a harvest mouse, take a photograph and/or remove it (making certain it is not occupied!) and send to us for identification along with your survey sheet(s). Don't forget to label the nest so we know what site it came from.



Photo credit: Poppy Morris

Where to look

Harvest mouse nests tend to be located in habitats with dense vegetation such as rough grassland, reedbeds, cereal fields, hedgerows, grassy road margins, ditches and brambles.

The two species of grass most favoured are cocksfoot (*Dactylis glomerata*) and reed canary-grass (*Phalaris arundinacea*), however any stiff leafy grass may be used for nest building.

Harvest mice do not favour thin grasses (where there is not enough cover for their nests), short grasses, or those where the stems are too weak to support their nests.

The height of the nest above the ground depends on the supporting vegetation. If the nest is built in reeds or cereals, for example reed canary-grass, they will tend to be built about halfway up the leafy stems and could be anything from 30cm to over a metre above ground level.

If the nest is built in grasses which form tussocks of leaves, for example cocksfoot or tufted hair grass, the nest is usually located on top of the tussock between the flowering stems, or occasionally under the overhanging leaves of the tussock. In this case, the nest will only be about 10cm above the ground.

Use the enclosed grass identification guide to identify suitable grasses.



Location of harvest mouse nests in reeds/cereals (left) and tussocky grasses (right)
(Mammals Society drawings from 'How to Find and Identify Mammals')

Survey timing

The surveys can be done any time from early November through to end of February, though later surveys run the risk of vegetation being flattened and/or nests destroyed by winter weather.

Survey method

When you arrive at your site check its condition, paying particular attention to any potential hazards such as water, uneven surfaces, stock etc, to ensure that it is safe to start the survey.

If you consider the conditions to be unsafe, come back another day.

If necessary, speak to the landowner before accessing their land.

Look carefully around your site for areas of suitable habitat (reedbeds, sedges, rushes, rough grassland, hedgerows, brambles or scrub). Once you have identified a suitable area of habitat, mark the approximate location of it on the map and begin to search for nests.

Please complete the survey form even if you find no nests, because it helps us to know where blank searches are completed.

Please fill out as much information as you can. If you can't identify the main plant species/vegetation, don't worry, the presence/absence is more important!

If you can, please take some photos of any nests you find and something to scale them against i.e. your hand. It would be good to have a photo of the general habitat as well.

Landowner permission

Some searches can be undertaken along footpaths. If your survey site is not on a public footpath, try to seek permission to carry out the survey from the landowner. The best way to find the owner is to go to the nearest farm house or ask at the local post office, pub or village shop.

On finding the landowner, introduce yourself as a volunteer for Worcestershire Mammal Group and explain that all you wish to do is to check suitable areas of their land for signs of harvest mouse presence. Offer to show them the 'letter to landowners'.

If given permission, arrange a suitable time to survey (either straight away or at a later date). If possible try to fit in with the landowners' wishes. If the owner wants you to telephone before you survey, take their number.

If they seem particularly interested, suggest they contact the Worcestershire Mammal Group for more information or take their details and pass them on to us. Similarly, if they ask you questions about harvest mice or the Worcestershire Mammal Group which you are unable to answer, suggest they contact us. Furthermore, if the landowner wants to know your results, please let them know or tell us so we can talk to them on your behalf.

If they tell you about anything of interest on their land or indeed anywhere else in the county, please note this information down. In particular, any information about mammals!

If you are unable to get permission to carry out the survey work, please try another site/area.

Remember: it is important for us to maintain good relations with landowners and other users

Health and safety

Most of the advice given in this section is common sense and, if you follow it and are generally careful, you should be perfectly safe and enjoy yourself.

IMPORTANT

Always have regard for your personal safety: it is more important than survey results!

If possible survey with someone else. If you do survey alone, make sure that you tell a responsible person where you are going and when you expect to return. Make sure you check in with them on your return, and that, if you fail to return, they will know to raise the alarm.

Before attempting to carry out a survey, make sure you have read and understood the risk assessment provided. Using this information, make an assessment of the safety of the site and of the activity you are taking part in.

If you feel it is too dangerous, **DO NOT ATTEMPT TO CARRY OUT A SURVEY**

After carrying out the survey

Please submit your records to us, preferably electronically by emailing

dom@worcestershirowildlifertrust.org or alternatively post the survey form to us:

Dominique Cragg c/o Worcestershire Wildlife Trust. Lower Smite Farm, Smite Hill, Hindlip,
Worcester WR3 8SZ

Put your feet up and have a cuppa. You have deserved it!

Thank you for helping out!