Northumbria Mammal Group Newsletter

OPAL Issue 1 Autumn Newsletter – 2011

Compiled by Jonathan Pounder

A brief history of the Northumbria Mammal Group

Northumbria Mammal Group was set up in 1997, by staff members from the Natural History Society of Northumbria (NHSN), Northumberland Wildlife Trust and Durham Wildlife Trust. Tees Valley Wildlife Trust joined us a few years later.

The Group extends its interest in mammals from the Scottish Borders in the north, to the southern boundary of the Tees Valley and North Yorkshire, and from the North Sea coast to the Cumbrian border in the west.

While we are an independent group, our main objectives include supporting and working in close association with NHSN and the three NE Wildlife Trusts, raising awareness among local people of Northumbria's native mammal species and their habitats, and doing what we can to protect them.

The Northumbria Mammal Group organises a yearly programme of mammal talks, field training events, field trips, surveys, community events and activities, in partnership with the Natural History Society of Northumbria, practical projects, local authorities and conservation organisations. All our members are very welcome to come along to these friendly events, whether you are a beginner or an expert. As well as mammals we do also see other wildlife and local flora.

Through the newsletter you will also receive details of specific upcoming events on mammal surveying and identification techniques delivered by local and national mammal expert, which are only open to our members.



By joining the Northumbria Mammal Group you will receive a copy of our fascinating quarterly newsletter in which you can find out more about mammals in the region and learn about the work we are doing to protect them. You will also directly contribute to the conservation of mammal species.

Membership costs

Our membership fees are usually:
Ordinary £5.00 Concessionary £2.50 Family £7.00 Junior (under 16) £1.50 Company,

however thanks to a grant from OPAL our MEMBERSHIP IS FREE until the end of May 2012 in return for at least one record of a mammal in the North East of England. If you would like to join please complete the membership form at the end of the newsletter.

Website

For updates on the mammal groups activities please check out: www.northumbriamammalgroup.org.uk. Kindly hosted by the Natural History Society of Northumbria, we aim to regularly update the website with events and training courses as they are arranged, and then advertise them in the newsletter every 3 months.

Dates of Newsletters

Edition	Articles submitted by	Newsletter published
Autumn 2011	Friday 8th July 2011	Friday 15th July 2011
Winter 2011	Friday 7th October 2011	Friday 14th October 2011
Spring 2012	Friday 6th January 2012	Friday 13th January 2012
Summer 2012	Friday 27th April 2012	Friday 5th May 2012

Do you want to write an article, advertise an event, interesting walk or talk; or a sighting you wish to share then send the details across. The dates for receiving information are (flexible and may change depending on events). If you have any ideas or suggestions please email northumbriamammalgroup@hotmail.co.uk

Photographs

If you have any mammal related pictures that you would like to share with the rest of the groups through the newsletter then please email them to northumbriamammalgroup@hotmail.co.uk together with a brief note about the picture and it will appear in the next issue of the newsletter.

Full credit for each photograph will be given, and if you agree they could even appear in the forthcoming Mammal Atlas of the North East and on the groups website.



What is it? Ask the experts!

Do you have a photograph/ specimen of something that you would like to identify? Have you seen a mammal doing something strange and want to know why? Simply email what you have and the members of the groups will do their best to answer any of your questions.

To start us off, can anyone hazard a guess at what animal deposited this??? (HINT – Its not wild or native!)

Please email your answers to northumbriamammalgroup@hotmail.co.uk

OPAL GRANT Scheme Application Success

It is with great pleasure that I am able to announce that the Northumbrian Mammal Group has secured £3000 from the OPAL Grant Scheme for a project entitled "Mammals Quest North East: a programme of Training Courses and Events for budding naturalists", thanks to the hard work of Veronica and the committee.

The project will started on the 1st May 2011 and last for just over a year and the outputs include:

- Implement 10 training sessions
- 10 daytime field surveys
- 4 Evening guided walks
- 4 public daytime events with species focus
- 4 Community presentations
- 5 special projects involving trail cameras and survey work (Dormouse, big cats, water voles, Otter, Badger).
- 400 people involved in activities, including 50 new members.
- 1200+ records generated.
- Production of the MONE,
- Production of 5 digital newsletters,
- Production of the Mammal Group Leaflet

One of the major parts of the OPAL Grant is the **year's FREE membership**!!!!

OPAL Information

Open Air Laboratories (OPAL), led by Imperial College London, www.imperial.ac.uk is a nationwide partnership initiative that inspires communities to discover, enjoy and protect their local environments. It aims to create a new generation of nature-lovers by stimulating interest through local and national projects which are accessible, fun and relevant to anyone who wants to take part. OPAL provides the skills and materials needed for the first national community-led study of the world around us. For more information, please visit www.OPALexplorenature.org

The Big Lottery Fund, the largest of the National Lottery good cause distributors, has been providing grants to health, education, environment and charitable causes across the UK since its inception in June 2004. It was established by Parliament on 1 December 2006. Full details of the work of the Big Lottery Fund, its programmes and awards are available on the website: www.biglotteryfund.org.uk

What training do you want in 2011???

For the OPAL grant we need to arrange 10 training sessions, 10 daytime field surveys, 4 evening guided walks, 4 public daytime events with species focus and 4 community presentations.

As a group we would like to encourage new people to experience the delights that British mammals bring, so if you would like to organise/ lead an event (you would be most welcome!!!) **or if you have any ideas for what training you would like to see** then please email www.northumbriamammalgroup.org.uk as soon as possible.



A Wood Mouse found during a recent small mammal trapping session in Durham

What events do you want in 2011/ 2012???

We are currently looking at what events the membership wants in 2011; yes more than usual f you have any ideas or suggestions please email www.northumbriamammalgroup.org.uk as soon as possible.

Natural History Society of Northumbria

"The Society's aims are to promote and encourage the study of natural history, protect the flora and fauna in the North-East of England, and care for and extend our library and collections at the Great North Museum: Hancock."

The Northumbria Mammal Group works in partnership with the Natural History Society of Northumbria forming the specialised mammal section for the Society; and in partnership deliver the mammal orientated winter lectures, events and activities. The Natural History Society of Northumbria also kindly host the Northumbria Mammal Groups website.

The Natural History Society of Northumbria launched an impressive new website in April, which provides details of NMG outdoor events and indoor lectures as well as mammal related education courses.

The site has a fairly straightforward Content Management System that will allow the group to add new pages, text, images, hyperlinks, downloads, etc. James Littlewood has offered to train Veronica Carnell how to do this, so that the group can keep their pages regularly updated.



Do You Have a Favourite Specimen in the GNM: Hancock?

The Natural History Society of Northumbria is looking for people to write a short review or story for the Society website about their favourite specimen or artefact in the Great North Museum: Hancock. Why you like it? Why it is special? They want to help make the collection more accessible with the views of local people and images of the items. If you would like to contribute please contact James Littlewood nhsn@ncl.ac.uk

Mammals of the North East Project (MONE)

Northumbria Mammal Group has embarked on a project to produce a book about the mammals of North East England. This is a particularly exciting and significant project as it will be the first account of all mammal species across the region since that of Mennell & Perkins in 1864. The publication will be a summary of what is known about the status of each species in the North East at the beginning of the twenty first century.

However given the 150 years gap since Mennell & Perkins it will also highlight any significant historical changes. In addition to mammals, it has been decided that the publication will also include species accounts for those reptile and amphibian species that are found in the North East.

Although it won't principally be an atlas, each species account will include a distribution map showing current known distribution and, in relevant cases, historical distribution. Inevitably there are significant gaps in our knowledge and preliminary distribution maps based on our current knowledge have lots of blank spaces where a species is likely to be present but has never been formally recorded.

The first task in the process has been to try and populate the distribution maps with as many records of mammals as possible. To help in this process the Environmental Records Information Centre (ERIC) North East has produced maps to 2km resolution of all the current records for each species. This will enable people to see where the gaps are so that surveys and recording can be targeted to those areas. To see the current distribution maps please go to http://www.nhsn.ncl.ac.uk/news/cms/mone/

The intention is to have the book published in 2012, which gives another season in which to collect more records. All records of any mammal, reptile or amphibian species are important and, as we are dealing with such a big geographical area, most records will probably result in new dot on the distribution map.
So please send us any records that you have both new and old, using the recording form at the end of the newsletter.

What is ERIC NE?

ERIC stands for Environmental Records Information Centre. It is the regional environmental records centre for the North East of England, covering Northumberland, Tyne & Wear, County Durham and Tees Valley.

ERIC works with wildlife recording groups and individuals to collate information on important species, habitats and sites in the North East. Such data is currently held in a variety of places in a number of different formats and is often difficult to access. ERIC will bring all this together, put paper records into an electronic format if necessary, validate and verify data, and improve access to biodiversity information in the region. The contact for any north east wildlife records is Katherine Pinnock at katherine.pinnock@twmuseums.org.uk.'

ERIC NE have produced update distribution maps for mammals for the MONE, which are available for anyone who wants to have a look at them (especially with a view to filling in any blanks).

Northumbria Mammal Group on Facebook

Search for Northumbria Mammal Group or click on the following link - https://www.facebook.com/?ref=home#!/home.php?sk=group_219105621438347&ap=1 to join the Northumbria Mammal Group on Facebook

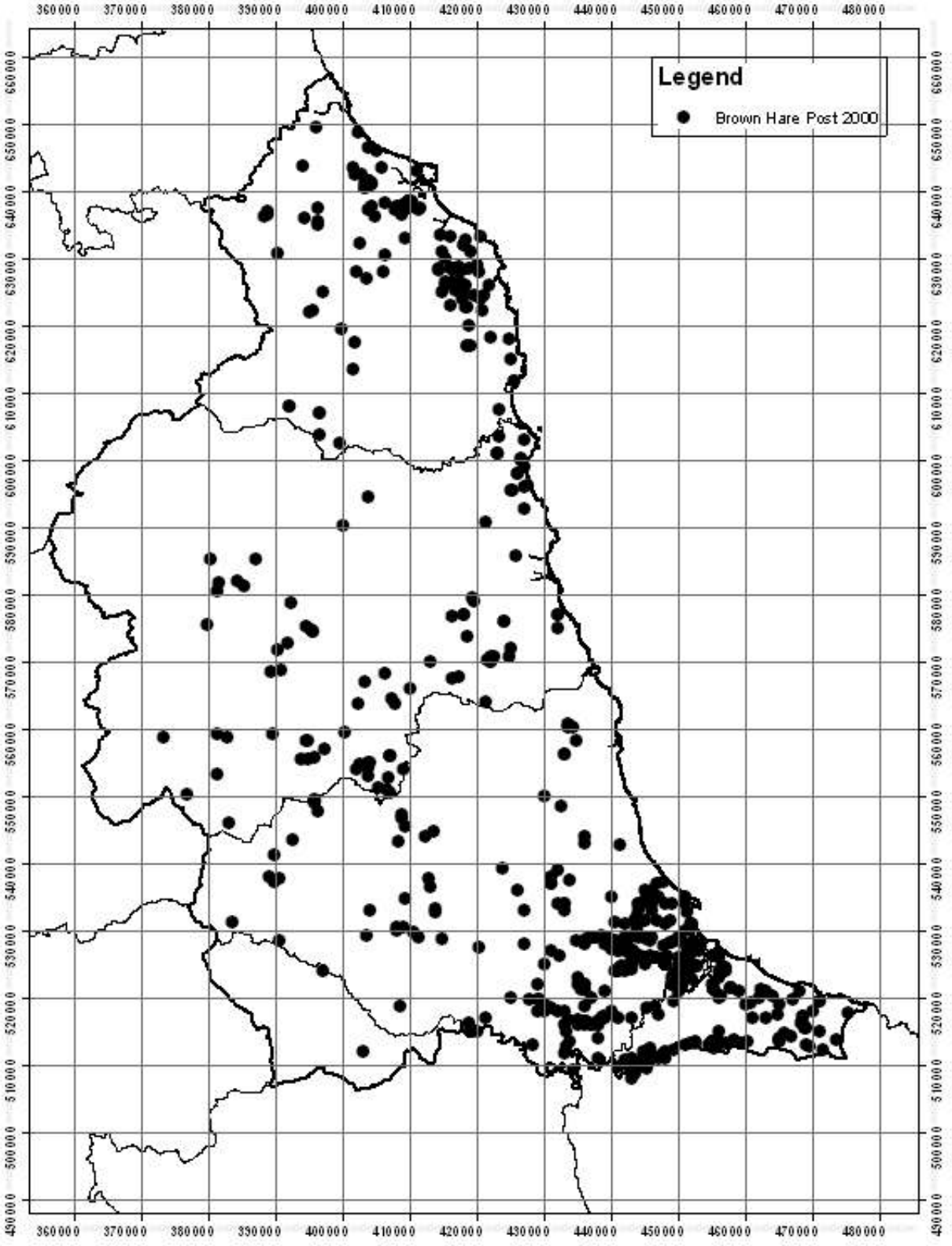


The OPAL Grant has just purchased the NMG three trail cameras, for members to use in our work

Sample maps of current North East mammal distribution

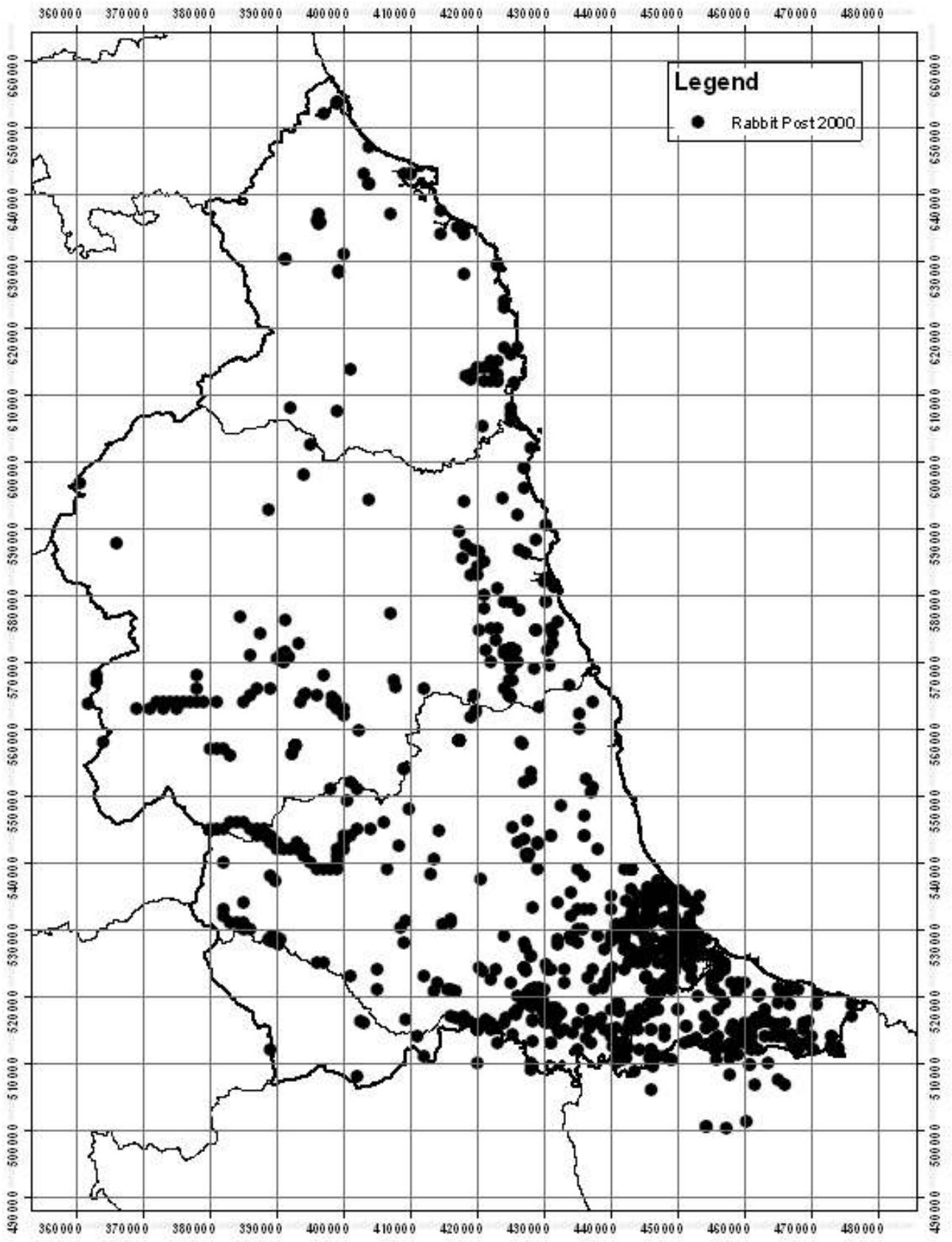
In each newsletter we will be selecting a handful of species and publishing the current distribution maps in order for you to see where the blanks in the North East distributions are, and hopefully if you submit the records we can fill in the blanks

Current distribution map for Brown Hare



As you can see there is a good coverage of Brown Hare records in the Tees Valley and the Northumberland Coast, but particularly the rural areas of Durham and Northumberland are lacking reports

Current distribution map for Rabbit



As you can see there is a good coverage of rabbit records in the Tees Valley, but as you move further north and away from urban centres, the coverage of records becomes patchy.

Focus on Brown Hares and Rabbits





European Rabbit – *Oryctolagus cuniculus*
Introduced into this country from the Mediterranean in the 12th century as a source of fur and meat, the rabbit quickly escaped and spread across the country. Now it is an extremely common sight in most areas.

Living in large burrow systems underground, this social animal eats a wide range of vegetation and is considered a pest species. Physically the rabbit's body is compact reflecting its life underground. When startled will run towards its burrow to seek shelter.

Brown Hare – *Lepus europaeus*
'Anciently introduced' (Harris & Yalden) to this country, the Brown Hare requires a good mixture of different habitats in order to live in an area. They spend all of their lives above ground, and as a result have a larger, more athletic body built for speed.

They have comparatively larger ears to head size than rabbits, black tipped ears, gold staring eyes and are typically solitary.

Rabbit		**Brown Hare**
Smaller body size & ears	*Comparative Body size*	Larger body size & ears
Body close to the ground and compact	*Body ground placement*	Stand more upright, prominent hind legs
Slower moving	*Movement*	Fast running
Social animals living together	*Social/ Solitary*	Mainly solitary
Use burrows in the ground, large systems	*Above/ below ground living*	Don't use burrows, live all lives above ground, usually laying up in tall vegetation

A Basic Mammal Spotting Guide

The following list gives you some basic advice on what to look for when looking for mammals, and what to do if you want to find out what you have seen:

1) Seeing the animal

A good glimpse of the animal going around its natural business can give you endless pleasure and a good opportunity to identify what it is with plenty of time. However if you are still unsure or only got the briefest sighting there are certain things that you can look for and remember that will help you identify the unknown animal.

Look for:

- What size is it – small (mouse sized) medium (rabbit sized) or large (dog sized or bigger)
- Its overall shape, are any features that stick out
- How it moves around,
- General coloration and any distinctive colours, particular where colour changes occur
- What it is doing
- The habitat you are in at the time



2) Without seeing the animal – what it leaves behind

- Footprints

Looking in wet mud/ sand or snow, can be good places to find footprints left as animals move around. Can sometime be distorted by the movement of the animal or be a combination of the same or several animals stepping in the same place. Deteriorates over time, especially in windy or wet conditions.

Ideally photograph with an object of known size (10 or 2p pieces are a useful example to use) to allow you to tell size at a later date – Opposite is a large dog footprint.



- Droppings (Scatology)

Yes a quick glimpse at the poo can tell you what species has left it, and more importantly what it has been feeding upon recently. Often found in specific areas (generally known as latrines) and are used to mark territorial boundaries.

Opposite is a picture of a badger latrine (centre)



- Feeding signs

Finding another dead animal and examining how it was killed/ eaten can give you clues about what animal killed it.

Birds of prey will pluck birds they have killed, foxes and mustelids will chew feathers away from the body leaving ragged edges.

Water voles will section up lengths of vegetation in preparation to eat, which have been cleanly snipped off (almost like a pair of scissors was used)



- Homes and pathways

Mammals can make their homes above and/ or below ground. The size and construction of these homes can often tell you what the animal that made them,

Water voles will often sit with there heads out of their burrows nibbling the grass growing around the entrance way to avoid predators – these are referred to as lawns (pictured).

Badger track ways are very clear and distinctive, and our paths and roadways will have originally started out as badger tracks.

- Hair – Often found on barbed wire/ vegetation; caught as the animal passed
- Feeding remains – e.g. owl pellets, hazel nuts
- Animal remains – road kill, skulls
- Damage – deer thrashing against saplings (pictured), voles and squirrels stripping bark



This is by no means an exhaustative list, but does give you the foundations to help you identify what you found.

Good sources for information:
The Mammal Society has a series of downloadable fact sheets available from their website at http://www.mammal.org.uk/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=249&Itemid=282

And a series of books and training courses available
Books:
http://www.mammal.org.uk/index.php?option=com_virtuemart&page=shop.browse&category_id=6&Itemid=219
Courses: http://www.mammal.org.uk/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=353&Itemid=336

OR AN EVEN SIMPLER WAY IS TO COME ALONG TO SOME OF THE NORTHUMBRIA MAMMAL GROUP EVENTS OR TALKS AND SPEAK TO THE OTHER MEMBERS!!!!!

A question for the membership:

Intro to Urban Mammal Identification - 24th Sept

Price: £60.00

Hosted by The Horniman Museum and run in association with The Mammal Society, this new one day event is a fascinating introduction to urban mammals and how to identify them. Combining an overview of the key mammals you might encounter in the local environment with an explanation of the main methods used to identify them, this is a great starting point for those with an interest in mammals who are looking to develop their skills and find out more about them

WOULD THE MEMBERSHIP BE INTERESTED IN A COURSE LIKE THIS FROM THE MAMMAL SOCIETY BEING RUN AT A LOCAL LEVEL – EITHER CERTIFICATED BY THE MAMMAL SOCIETY OR THROUGH THE NORTHUMBRIAN MAMMAL GROUP???

Please let the committee know!!

Mammals in Durham – a brief historical look

In the 40 years since Durham Wildlife Trust was launched our knowledge of mammals in Durham has increased considerably. The fortunes of some mammal species have followed a similar trajectory though sadly for others the graph has sloped down fairly dramatically.

Vying for the title of biggest loser we have red squirrels and water voles. Water voles probably shade it in terms of biggest percentage loss based on the original population size but there are at least signs of hope for them. The red squirrel, on the other hand, just about clings to survival in Durham and may do well to see in the 50th anniversary.

Unfortunately there isn't much data on the populations of most mammal species back in the early 1970s and for many an assessment can really only be made in terms of the amount of suitable habitat. Nevertheless many species are known to have increased and others might be assumed to have done so based on increases in the amount of suitable habitat.

The latter decades have seen significant new woodland planting, particularly in the former community forest areas and this has led to a burgeoning roe deer population with an estimate 20,000 now present throughout the north east. These areas also provides abundant habitat for small mammals; in their early stages of

growth for field voles and shrews then for bank voles and wood mice as they mature. Two less welcome species that have benefited from this tree planting are grey squirrels and muntjac. The former would have had a mainly southern distribution in County Durham in 1971 but is now virtually everywhere and has even nipped over the Tyne into Northumberland. Muntjac were first sighted in the late 90s around Darlington but have now been recorded in several locations across County Durham. Their current distribution seems to be localised but the next 40 years will no doubt see them become established across most of the county.

Two species that were hardly known at all back in 1971 were the harvest mouse and the water shrew. Then the only twentieth century records for harvest mouse were two unconfirmed ones from High Spen with only a few for water shrew across the whole county. We now know that harvest mouse is widespread in the Tees Lowlands and water shrews are cropping up with increasing frequency though is probably still greatly under-recorded.

Our most cryptic mammals must be the bats. As if to prove the point three new bat species have been added to the county (and country) list since 1971. Two of these species, Brandt's bat and soprano pipistrelle, weren't even recognised as species in their own right back then. The third species, Nathusius' pipistrelle is a migratory species of northern Europe that was only found to be breeding in this country in the 90s and has only been found to be present in County Durham in the last decade. There is increasing evidence that a fourth species, Leisler's bat, may now be occurring in the north east so that will be the next bat mystery to solve.

Easily the success story of the past 40 years has been the otter. In the 1980s I remember being shown a tatty, stuffed otter in an old mill on the Skerne near Great Burdon in Darlington. It had been killed on that stretch of the river in the late C19 and to me it was almost like looking at the remnants of a dodo, the last of its species that was ever likely to occur there. Now the Trust is putting otter holts along that same stretch of river and otters even turn up along the Skerne as it passes through Darlington town centre. Across the county, otters have gone from being virtually extinct in 1971 to the situation where there is now an otter almost everywhere that there is room for one and it can't be long before the county has reached its carrying capacity for them. It just shows what 40 years of conservation can do. *Ian Bond*

The Big Cat Diaries – Summer 2011

The launch of my book has generated quite of bit of interest (which unfortunately isn't the same as sales) among my work colleagues and several have come forward to tell me their big cat story. First up was someone who had been camping near Hawes with the family. Looking over the dry-stone wall from their camp site, in the next field they saw a sandy coloured cat, the size of a large dog (and when he indicated the size he meant a very large dog), which just strolled away, paying them no attention.

Another was driving down the A1 western bypass at Low Fell with his Dad when they saw a large animal, the colour of cardboard, on a mound by the side of the road. They didn't get a good look but were sure it wasn't a dog. It did occur to me that this could have been one of those occasions when the animal actually was a muntjac.

The most detailed report was from a former colleague who e-mailed me the following report:
"I was working at (name withheld) Farm; Racecourse Road; Sedgefield yesterday (Monday 21st) when I turned to look towards the hedge line I witnessed a large animal all black in colour running down between a tree and some sheds. The distance was two fields away and I was on the house roof repairing the slates. It was as large as say a Labrador dog maybe slightly larger. Jet black in colour and its gait wasn't like a dogs gait its two front legs sort of went out together and its tail which seemed to be thicker than normal hardly moved when it ran. I alerted my labourer who saw it too and he said its a cat but a big one. It covered the distance of about 100 yards in about 6 or 7 seconds and disappeared into the undergrowth. We both had a good look at it for about 10 seconds and were surprised at its size. I have kept Lurcher's most of my life and it certainly wasn't a dog. The visibility was excellent and it was sort of late morning /dinner time when we saw it."

Another person remembered a sighting from the mid 1990s, when she was a teenager. A couple of her friends, aged about 14, were in a field that bordered the Clavering estate at the north of Hartlepool when they saw a big cat. They climbed over a fence to get away from it whereupon the lad got his body warmer caught on the fence and was so frightened that he wet himself. My colleague wasn't present herself so couldn't recall details of the cat but it had obviously created a lasting impression.

On the other hand I received a word of caution from a former colleague at the Wynyard Woodland Park about the recent sightings there.

“Hi Ian, I had another 'big cat' sighting the other day at Grindon, however I would temper your excitement. Most of the sightings have been near Grindon and it so happens that the Hateley's house is now occupied by new owners who have 2 black cats. When I quizzed the spotter the other day he said it went up the steps towards the house. When I grilled him on its size, he eventually agreed it may have been the size of a large male domestic cat (at the start of the conversation it was a panther). The gentleman is a regular visitor and was aware of big cat sightings. He also couldn't tell me if it had a tail or not. I am suspicious that people are expecting to see a big black cat and it can sometimes be difficult to judge scale. The two cats may also explain the sighting of cat with 'cub'. I am now leaving my chainmail vest, pepper spray and taser at home. Cheers, Bob”

While I think Bob’s probably got it right with these two sightings, the previous sightings included one of a cat chasing a deer and another of a sandy-coloured cat, of lioness proportions a couple of miles north of Grindon, in the Pickard’s Meadow. Whatever these two cats were it probably wasn’t a moggie. Another piece of news coming out of Wynyard Woodland Park is that they have got a grant to turn the 16ha former arable field that is Pickard’s Meadow, into a wildflower meadow and that it is to be grazed by sheep. Not only is this a regionally significant habitat creation scheme but it also means that I will no longer have to go to the trouble of staking out a goat there.

I have long since stopped being surprised by the number of people who have a big cat, sighting story. In fact I start my big cat talks by announcing that there will be someone in the audience who has either seen a big cat or knows of someone who has. I feel a bit like a stage clairvoyant but so far I’ve not been wrong. I’ve done three talks in the last couple of months. The retired teacher’s group in Hartlepool had between them seen a big black cat crossing a cereal field at Sheraton, just north of Hartlepool (big enough to be seen through the crop which was at the harvestable stage) and a big, black cat running across a meadow in the south of France several decades ago.

At the talk to Darlington Naturalist’s Field Club I thought I was going to draw a blank, the only person who spoke up to say that he had seen a big cat in the north east was the person who gave the vote of thanks, who had seen a panther on a lead in the meat market in Newcastle, in the years before the Dangerous Wild Animal Act. Nevertheless, afterwards several people came up to me to tell me about sightings. Most of the details are a bit of a blur what with having to pack away and renew my membership etc but one of the reports was from my half-cousin, who I hadn’t seen for years, who had seen an Ocelot down in Gloucestershire. Another was from the man who during the question time at the end had got up and spent about 5 minutes expounding on why there weren’t any big cats out there (I’m not sure if he actually asked a question). He had seen a Caracal cross the road in to Aycliffe Quarry about 20 years ago.

Best of all though was the talk to Hartlepool Natural History Society. The talk was opened up to the public and we had around 60 people, several of whom had come because they had seen a big cat. At least two had come because a member of their family had seen one but weren’t able to come in person so had sent a relative; it felt a bit like I was a cryptozoological Messiah, confirming their faith in big cats. (In case anyone takes offence at that I should point out that I’m not really the Messiah, I’m just a very naughty boy!) Afterwards I had a queue of people who wanted to talk about their sighting and I made a note of seven reports. I didn’t manage to speak to everyone and got the impression that there would have been more had we not had to vacate the premises dead on 9pm. Four of these reports were the standard, big, black cat, the size of a Labrador/Alsation/Great Dane, crossed the road in front of me though none the less significant for being typical. All four sightings had made a profound impression and at least three had been at very close range, in fact one had to slow down for it; these things really must have nine lives. The most recent was by a couple whose sighting had been reported in the Hartlepool Mail.

They came along to the talk and were able to clarify some of the details (and made it a much better talk for having some real live witnesses). Their sighting had been mid-morning on the Coast Road where it bisects the Denes at the north of Hartlepool. A very large, dark-coloured animal with a particularly long tail ran across the road from Crimdon Dene, which is a popular recreational woodland next to the beach and disappeared in to the extensive and largely off-limits, Thorpe Bulmer Dene. The road is very shaded at that point so they couldn’t be sure of the colour and had assumed that it was a puma as co-incidentally the husband used to do a bit of drawing and pumas were one of his favourite subjects. However on learning that pumas are never black they thought it more likely that it had been a panther.

Unsurprisingly, as this was a talk in Hartlepool, almost all of the reports were from the typical Trimdon Panther locations. Someone started telling me about their sister’s sighting at Peterlee, which immediately struck me as out of place as it would have been a bit further north than the usual report locations but then it turned out that she had been driving south on the A19 near Castle Eden Dene when she saw it. Included in these Trimdon Panther reports was one from the fox hunting era. The terrier man from the local hunt

was about to put a couple of dogs down a fox hole near Hurworth Burn Reservoir when he looked up and found himself staring in to the face of a panther that was under a bush a few feet away. So much for the argument that big cats can't be out there because the hunts never encounter them. My favourite of these seven tales was the one that was from further afield, on a farm near Scotch Corner. The farmer was lifting bales out of a barn with a tractor; as he took one of the bales out, there was a panther that had been resting up behind it.

An even odder location for a big cat was a residential area in Shotley Bridge. Described as jet black with a sleek coat, rounded ears and a tail longer than the body, the animal was watched by two people from their window on the opposite side of the road for around a minute as it sniffed a wall on the other side of the cul-de-sac then strode off towards Shotley Bridge Hospital! I would normally tend to dismiss this as a misidentified moggie but the animal was estimated to be about 18-20" high, which they calculated by comparing it to the wall, which they later measured as being 12" high.

Shotley Bridge is at least within a bit of a hot spot for big cat sightings. I received an e-mail from a man in Littletown, just east of Durham City, which definitely isn't on their usual path. I got the impression that he knew something of big cat sightings already as he asked whether this was the only sighting this far north. (In fact it isn't the only one but it is unusual). The animal in question was spotted near to an area used for smallholdings, sheep and allotments at around 6pm on Saturday March 5th, at which time it would have just been getting dark. The man's collie dog, which had earlier been behaving strangely, heckles up and sniffing about, saw the animal and tried to give chase though in vain as this animal shot off with "amazing acceleration" and dashed off into the Woodland Trust site of Elemore. He estimated that its height was similar to that of the collie, ie 21 inches. Perhaps the reason that reports are very rare in that area is that there is very little woodland cover in east Durham, in fact other than the coastal denes, Elemore is about it.
I thought I'd finish with another report from back at HQ in Hartlepool. I gave an interview on BBC Radio Tees about my book and as a result was contacted by a man about his sighting in Thorpe Bulmer Dene some 15-16 years ago. He had been in a quiet part of the wood without public access and had just sat down on a log when a large, Labrador sized animal with a cat face and its tail straight up in the air got up about 20-25 yards away from him. It just walked away slowly, without really paying him too much attention.

I've finished with this report because it illustrates one of a couple of points that have struck me in the six months since I finished "The Path of the Panther." Firstly there are an increasing number of sightings that go back beyond the lifespan of any cats living today and from locations other than those that I remember as typical of the Durham Puma back in the 80s. Secondly there has been a significant increase in the number of reports that I am receiving, full stop! I was anticipating this because of the publicity around my book, though actually other than among my colleagues and the report above, its generated very little interest.

Instead this seems to be part of a trend. So much so that, as you may have noticed, I have got to the point with some reports of briefly summarising them, lumping them together or, in the case of the talk to Darlington Field Club, not even bothering to note them all. It makes me wonder whether or not I should reconsider my opinion that there is just the odd cat out there and that while breeding isn't impossible it must be extremely rare. But then the alternative, that there might be a small population in the North East, still doesn't seem right to me either. Oh well, we'll just have to see what the next batch of reports indicates.

Forthcoming Events in 2011

Saturday 2nd July 2011 Gosforth Park Nature Reserve Exploration Day
An opportunity to learn about the fauna and flora of Gosforth Park Nature Reserve. Local experts will be on hand to talk to visitors about birds, plants, mammals and insects. Drop in anytime between 10.30am - 3.30pm. This is a partnership event with the Environmental Records Centre, Butterfly Conservation and Northumbria Mammal Group. This event is open to all members of the public, both adults and children. Please note that ground can be wet, muddy and uneven, so please wear suitable footwear. The nature reserve is adjacent to the A189 close to Newcastle Racecourse.



Sunday 3rd July 2011 Seals on Teesside Julie Mason
We will be visiting one or possibly two sites in the Tees estuary to watch the seals hauling out at low tide. We expect to get good views of Common Seals with pups and maybe the odd Grey Seal for comparison, and there may be a chance to catch a glimpse of an otter. There will be a short talk by the leader on seal biology and ecology. Wear footwear and clothing suitable for the event. Bring binoculars and camera. Accompanied children are welcome, and the area is wheelchair accessible.

Please meet at the Teesmouth Field Centre, near Hartlepool Power Station at 11.30. Grid Ref. NZ 526 272 The event will last approximately two hours. Contact: Steve Lowe on 0191 284 6884 (c/o Wildlife Trust) for further information



Saturday 30th July 2011 Cetacean Trip - Royal Quays, River Tyne
Join us for a four hour evening pelagic trip accompanied by a whale and dolphin expert. Booking essential. Cost: £30.00 Contact: Steve Lowe on 0191 284 6884 (c/o Wildlife Trust) for further information

Bats in Gosforth Park Nature Reserve
Friday 19th August 2011
Tina Wiffen Starting at 20.00h. (1½ hours)
Saturday 3rd September 2011
Jonathan Pounder Starting at 19.45h. (1½ hours)
These will be evening events starting around sunset and continuing till dark. There will be a short talk on bat biology and ecology, and as the sun is setting we will walk through the reserve looking for and listening to the bats we find. Wear strong footwear and clothes suitable for the conditions, which may be muddy. If possible, please bring a torch. Contact NHSN office to book

Saturday 27th August 2011 Small Mammals at Rainton Meadows, Houghton-le-Spring
We will be examining bait tubes and Longworth live traps for signs and presence of small mammals (mice, voles and shrews), and participants will be able to re-bait and reset the traps after examination if they wish. Please be prepared for mud and slippery, wet conditions underfoot. Contact: Steve Lowe, zappa99@live.co.uk for further information.

Coming Up in Summer/ Autumn *(Once details are confirmed, a brief flyer will be emailed out to the membership)*

- Water Vole Surveying in Hartlepool – Continuing the search for water vole signs in the watercourses of Hartlepool. Limited numbers to participate in the survey. If you are interested in learning more about Water Vole surveying then please email northumbriamammalgroup@hotmail.co.uk
- Otter Surveying in Stockton – Talk and survey looking for Otter signs in watercourses flowing through Stockton. If you are interested in learning more about Otter surveying then please email northumbriamammalgroup@hotmail.co.uk
- Otter & Water Vole Surveying in Middlesbrough – Survey of beck channels in Middlesbrough to review the surveys implemented in 2001
- Bat Walk at Cowpen Bewley – Investigate the nocturnal activity at Cowpen Bewley Woodland Park
- Water Vole Survey in Durham – The membership points in the direction of an area to survey for Water Vole (either confirming historic records OR investigate a new site) and Jonathan will go investigating!
- Otter Surveying in Durham – The membership points in the direction of an area to survey for Otter (either confirming historic records OR investigate a new site) and Jonathan will go investigating!
- Badger Survey in Durham – The membership points in the direction of an area to survey for Badger (either confirming historic records OR investigate a new site) and Jonathan will go investigating! High Wood in Durham could also benefit from a survey
- Squirrel & Mammal Walk in Durham – A walk around Houghall Farm looking for mammal activity.

Information on events correct at time of publishing, please check local press/ NHSN/ events leaflets for details closer to the time. Further information provided upon booking

Group Contacts

Want to get more involved with the mammal groups, please contact:

- **Information/queries/events:** Tel: 0191 213 2647 Email: vacarnell@hotmail.com
- **Newsletter:** Jonathan Pounder, 88 Durham Street, Hartlepool, TS24 0HE Tel: (07980 581 437 Email: jonathan_pounder@hotmail.com
- **Membership:** Katherine Pinnock, at the Great North Museum: Hancock, Barras Bridge, Newcastle, NE2 4PT. Tel. 0191 222 5031 Email: katherine.pinnock@twmuseums.org.uk

A busy time for Water Voles in the North East

WATER VOLES, *Arvicola terrestris*, ON THE RIVER DON AT BOLDON (21st May 2011)

Kevin O'Hara, Wetlands Conservation Officer for Northumberland Wildlife Trust, supported by Michael Rogers, Living Waterways Project Officer with Durham Wildlife Trust, led a walk along a stretch of the River Don at Boldon, looking for water voles and their signs.



Kevin informed, entertained and inspired us using the benefit of his wide experience of water vole ecology, behaviour, and conservation issues, as we walked slowly along the well-vegetated river banks. Michael explained how the Trust and the Environment Agency are working on habitat management to protect the water vole population. (Mink are not considered to be a threat on this site, because it is a busy residential area).



One water vole had been seen earlier in the day, and as we watched, what was presumed to be a water vole chewed the base of a cow parsley stem in the tall vegetation of the river bank, although good sightings could not be achieved in this instance. However, we did see plenty of runs and feeding signs – piles of cut plant stems - and we counted at least 5 good latrine sites along a 200m stretch of the river, some of which showed the 'paddling' activity of the males as they search for a female.

Kevin O'Hara and Michael Rogers searching for signs of Water Vole in the River Don. *Photos by John Carnell*.



Students are a voling success in Hartlepool!

College students have recently rediscovered the Water Voles that where thought lost from Hartlepool's becks. A group of 5 conservation students from East Durham College made the discovery during a Water Vole training session at Greatham Beck Local Nature Reserve in Hartlepool. This was the first confirmed sighting in over a year and establishes that the nationally rare Water Vole does indeed call Hartlepool its home.

The conservation survey was part of a partnership project between Northumbria Mammal Group, Hartlepool Countryside Wardens and East Durham College; funded by the OPAL Grant fund through the Big Lottery Fund. The project hopes to investigate mammal distribution across the North East and will culminate in the publication of the North East's first Mammal Atlas next year.

Jonathan Pounder, Lecturer in Environmental Conservation at East Durham College, explained: "Water Voles where once common across the North East but due to changes in agriculture, pollution and predation from the American Mink they have sadly been lost from much of their traditional range.

"The success of the survey helps to highlight the resilience of Britain's wildlife, and by simply looking for an animal you can turn up some unexpected results!"

Robert Smith, a nearby resident with a long term interest in the wildlife of the Greatham Beck Local Nature Reserve, added: "This is great news for the many people on the Fens who value the excellent wildlife habitat on their doorstep."

"It is also very rewarding for all the local youngsters and adults who together with the Countryside Wardens have worked hard over the years to maintain this wildlife corridor in such good condition. Welcome back Ratty!"

NORTHUMBRIA MAMMAL GROUP ANNUAL REPORT MAY 2010 – MAY 2011

Northumbria Mammal Group Committee.

Chair…….. Veronica Carnell
Secretary ……..……..……..…….. Ian Bond
Treasurer ……..…… Tina Wiffen
Membership Secretary…….…….…… Katherine Pinnock
Newsletter editor ……. . Jonathan Pounder
Natural History Society Representative……... Bob Wilkin
Northumberland WT Representative……..… Steve Lowe
Durham WT Representative……..…… Jim Cokill
Tees Valley WT Representative..……..…… Kenny Crooks
Committee members…….……..… Don Griss, Vicki Armitage, Stuart Will, John Carnell

Mammal Group Representative on NHSN Council….. Steve Lowe

At last year's AGM, Steve Lowe was elected as the NMG representative on the Council of the Natural History Society of Northumbria, and we are grateful for his input with Council on behalf of the Group. As such, and among other things, he has organized and led the three mammal related winter lectures held at the GNM:Hancock Museum, all of which were well attended.

Francesca Leslie stepped down as membership secretary, to pursue a career change. Thank you, Fran, for all the work you did for the group in maintaining and improving the membership database, and for initiating the members' electronic information update circulation system.

We welcomed Katherine Pinnock, (who, like Fran,) also works with the Environmental Records and Information Centre, as our new membership secretary and newsletter/information distributor.

We also welcomed John Carnell as a new committee member.

Field events were generally well attended across the region, and included seals on Teesside (Julie Mason from Teesmouth Field Centre), two bat events in Gosforth Park, led by Jonathan, and Tina and the pelagic cruise was cancelled due to unsuitable sea conditions. Thank you to all the leaders of the events, for sharing their time, knowledge and expertise.

Following a SWOT analysis by the committee, a questionnaire was distributed to members during the course of the year, in an attempt to establish the future direction of the group. The replies showed that, not surprisingly, our newsletter turned out to be our greatest and most popular strength : thank you Jonathan for all your work as editor.
Several members showed interest in helping with the group – thank you to them, and we look forward to picking up these offers during the course of the coming year.

As the year progressed, Katherine Pinnock received a steady flow of new mammal records for the 'Mammals of the North East' Project, MONE, which is being headed up by Ian Bond. The Mammal Group records database (a sub-set of the main ERIC database) now holds ……000 records. Ian has set up a sub-committee to monitor the progress of the project.

In March 2011, we were awarded a grant of £3090 from the OPAL Grants Scheme.
We look forward to plenty of mammal-related activity across the region, as we aim to fulfil our project objectives of adding to the MONE records database while raising awareness and commitment for mammals and their habitats among members and other local people.

It just remains for me to thank Tina for her patience and reliability in keeping the accounts straight, to Ian for his proficiency and dedication as secretary, Jonathan Pounder for his success with the newsletter and other publicity and all our committee members for their valued contributions to the Mammal Group.

Veronica Carnell. April 28th 2011

NORTHUMBRIA MAMMAL GROUP CONSTITUTION.

NAME AND OBJECTIVES

1. The name of the group shall be Northumbria Mammal Group
2. The object of the group shall be to promote the study and monitoring of mammals in NORTHUMBRIA, and to conserve and protect Northumbria's mammals and their habitats.
3. The group shall support and promote the aims of the MAMMAL SOCIETY.

MEMBERSHIP

4. Membership of the group shall be open to any person supporting the aims of the group and who pays the group subscription fee determined by the annual review meeting of the group. Members should already be, or should be encouraged to become, members of their local Wildlife Trust, the local Natural History Society, the Mammal Society, the local badger groups or the local bat groups. In addition any other organisation may affiliate to the Northumbria Mammal Group and receive the benefits of membership subject to paying the appropriate subscription fee determined at the annual review meeting of the group.
5. Membership is open to all persons regardless of race, colour, creed, sex, sexuality, age or political affiliation.

MEETING/EVENTS

6. The group will each year hold an annual review meeting. All members will receive notification of this meeting at least one month in advance.
7. The group will hold various events during the year as organised by the Publicity Officer. These will be advised to members by the group newsletter or separate mailing as appropriate. Interested non-members will be welcome at these events.
8. All members are encouraged to organise a meeting or event, providing it promotes the objectives of the group. Members interested in this should liaise with the Publicity Officer beforehand.

RESPONSIBILITIES

9. The group will have the following officers, called the committee, appointed by the group at the annual review meeting. A full re-election of the committee will occur after the first year. Subsequent years will re-elect two committee members only in order to keep continuity and the committee together. The committee will be responsible for the affairs of the group on a day to day basis.

<u>Officer Responsibilities</u>

a. Chairman To organise the group on a daily basis and act as a central point

b. Recorder To collate and control mammal recordings of group
c. Secretary To record minutes and support the Chairman
d. Treasurer To maintain group accounts and present them at annual review meeting
e. Membership Secretary To maintain group membership records
f. Publicity Officer To organise events calendar, newsletter and deal with the media
g. Area Officer To act as contact point for surveys and problems in particular area
h. Representatives of local wildlife and other groups To look after the particular group's interests
i. Ordinary Member To represent the views of ordinary members

Other responsibilities will be adopted by individual or sub-groups as the need arises.

10. The group will maintain a bank account. Any withdrawal of funds will require the signature of two officers, one of which should be the *treasurer*. The names of both signatories must be on the mandate, which is held at the Bank.

TERMINATION

In the event of the group being disbanded any funds of the group will be remitted to the local Wildlife Trusts, Natural History Society, local badger and local bat groups.

AMENDMENTS

The constitution may be amended with the agreement of those present at the annual review meeting. Members will be given at least one week's notice of

Northumbria Mammal Group Accounts 2010/11

INCOMINGS SOURCE	AMOUNT	**OUTGOINGS** DESTINATION	AMOUNT	**BALANCE**
Balance at 01/04/10				**£2,303.41**
Membership fees	£213.50	Postage, stamps	£47.52	
Marine mammal trip	£510.00	Marine mammal trip, refunds	£480.00	
		Equipment	£769.88	
		Mammal Society subs	£45.00	
		Events	£30.00	
		Insurance	£134.79	
Total	£723.50		£1,507.19	
Balance at 04/04/11				**£1,519.72**

Marine mammal refund, cheque number 86, George Watson, £30, not cashed

Equipment bought; 10 Longworth traps, dormouse tubes

RESERVE ACCOUNT

INCOMINGS SOURCE	AMOUNT	**OUTGOINGS** DESTINATION	AMOUNT	**BALANCE**
Balance at 31/03/10				**£1,611.56**
Interest	£0.64			
Balance at 31/03/11				**£1,612.20**

Mammal Recorders

If you have any records from walks, events or live trappings, please forward them onto the county mammal recorders, even the small piece of information can prove to be very useful. The county recorders are:

Northumberland: ERIC (Environmental Records Information Centre North East), Great North Museum: Hancock, Barras Bridge, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE2 4PT Tel: 0191 222 5158
Email: eric.ne@twmuseums.org.uk

Durham: Don Griss, C/O Durham Wildlife Trust, Rainton Meadows, Chilton Moor, Houghton-le-Spring, Tyne & Wear, DH4 6PU Email: dmgriss@btinternet.com

Cleveland: Jonathan Pounder, 88 Durham Street, Hartlepool, TS24 0HE Tel: (07980 581 437)
Email: jonathan_pounder@hotmail.com

Recording your mammal sightings

Your records are really important to us, as we try and build up a picture of our region's mammal populations/distribution. If you see a mammal (whether it be running out in front of you, or lying dead at the side of the road) please take 30 seconds and complete the record form and send your information into your appropriate County Mammal Recorder. If you come along to an event, why not bring **your** mammal records with you and give them to the event leader, who will then pass them on to the appropriate mammal recorder for you.

NAME OF RECORDER:.....

CONTACT DETAILS:.....

Mammals of the North East project - recording form

Species	Borough	Location	Grid Ref	Date	Signs	No	Habitat	Notes	Recorder

E-Membership Form

Please complete the following information and email it to Northumbriamammalgroup@hotmail.co.uk or hand it back

Title	
Forename	
Surname	
Address	
Date of Birth	
Contact telephone number	
Contact Email Address	

Please tell us what areas you are interested in or ideas for events or training you would like to see the group complete; or if you would be interested in helping the group in some way:

Mammals of the North East project - recording form

Species	Borough	Location	Grid Ref	Date	Signs	No	Habitat	Notes