

NEWS IN BRIEF

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UK Biodiversity Action Plans are changing...

For more than a decade, efforts to halt and reverse biodiversity loss in the UK have been delivered through a series of priority habitat and species action plans. Many of these have worked well, but often in a rather uncoordinated way. A revision of the priority lists last year brought an opportunity to develop a more integrated approach and the four parts of the UK are now developing new delivery mechanisms based on integrating many aspects of the species and habitat action plans. Where possible, the right habitats with the right features for the species that live in them will now be delivered through a series of integrated groups at the country level. These will involve both habitat and species specialists and will work at the large scale that all concerned recognise as being essential in order to continue making progress towards the 2010 target of halting biodiversity loss. Of course, not all species conservation can be delivered in this way, as not all priority species problems are simply a matter of habitat quantity or quality, but it should work for the great majority that are closely linked to a particular priority habitat.

For mammals, there will be a small number of new priority species, although not all will be adopted in all parts of the UK. Candidates for inclusion are the hedgehog, harvest mouse, mountain hare, pine marten, polecat, noctule, long-eared bat and common seal. We are currently looking at what actions are most urgently required for each of these species and how these might best be delivered.

TONY MITCHELL-JONES, NATURAL ENGLAND



DAVE BEVAN

Polecats are among the UK species set to be given their own Biodiversity Action Plan (BAP) in the near future. Other candidate species include hedgehogs, harvest mice, pine martens and common seals.

n BOVINE TB IN DEER

Two reports recently published by Defra have prompted interest in the occurrence of the cattle disease bovine tuberculosis (bTB) in deer. Bovine TB has been identified in five of the six species of deer

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resident in Great Britain, with variable frequency depending on the species and geographical area, although overall prevalence in the national deer herd (farmed, wild and park) is thought to be low.

The final report of the *South West England and Cotswolds Survey of Tuberculosis in Deer* shows that on Forestry Commission land in the south west Peninsula, bTB is present in less than 1% of deer, (except in one area where it is present in 3.8% of fallow deer). In the Cotswolds, however, prevalences of up to 15.9% were found, again in fallow deer, which was the species most likely to harbour high levels of infection with the bacterium

causing bTB, *Mycobacterium bovis*.

The second Defra report addresses the risk posed to cattle by wild deer and finds that deer are likely to pose a lower TB risk to cattle than badgers throughout most of south west England and Wales. A previous report suggested that deer would only pose a risk to cattle if a high proportion were infected and, even then, the incidence of contact close enough to allow transmission would be low, due to the naturally reclusive nature of deer species.

Government advice is that while bTB is not currently a significant risk in wild deer, stalkers and managers should take the disease risk into

Among resident UK deer species, fallow deer are most susceptible to the cattle disease bovine tuberculosis.



DAVE BEVAN



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account in managing deer herds.

Defra will be working with the Deer Initiative to share this new information with the industry and to help inform future plans. Both reports can be found at: www.defra.gov.uk/animalh/tb/index.htm

There are no plans as yet to cull deer specifically to control bTB, but in December *Country Life* magazine called for a massive and widespread cull to reduce deer numbers generally. The suggestion is based on the fact that the national deer population is currently at its highest level for 1 000 years. In such numbers, the magazine says, deer conflict with the interests of forests and farmers.

n HEDGEROWS FOR DORMICE

The current fragmented state of Britain's hedgerows has left dormouse populations in not-so splendid isolation and horribly prone to reduction and even extinction. In fact there has been a 64% decline in dormouse numbers in hedgerows since the late 1970s.

Historically, the hazel dormouse was frequently found in hedgerows. For several years PTES has been working to enhance the hedgerows and other habitat around the sites where we have reintroduced dormice to the countryside. But really something more ambitious is called for.

In 2009 we will be launching a project to connect marooned, island populations of dormice across England (to start with) and to provide new hedgerow for them to inhabit. We are going to make a nationwide map showing where hedgerows are and the state they are in around known dormice areas. This will provide the basis for management plans

for the landowners involved and we will offer volunteer help to restore degraded hedgerows. It is intended that this focused work will benefit many other priority species including hedgehogs, harvest mice, and bird and insect species that also depend on hedgerows.

We have been awarded a special grant from Natural England's Countdown 2010 scheme to get started and have to raise matching funds as we go along. More news of this next time.

n GORILLA STATES ACT TOGETHER

November saw the first meeting between representatives of the 10 Africa Gorilla States. The meeting, in Rome, was the culmination of two years work forging a series of international measures aimed at conserving some of the world's most threatened primates.

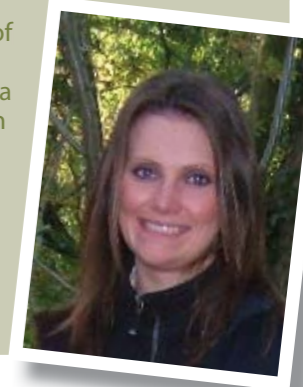
The Cameroon government used the opportunity to announce the opening of a new National Park created specifically to support the world's rarest subspecies of gorilla. Takamanda National Park abuts the Nigerian Cross River National Park. Linking the two together will alleviate the problem of habitat fragmentation in the area. The new park is home to 115 Cross River gorillas, more than a third of the world population.

n HARBOUR SEALS IN TROUBLE

Survey results published by the Natural Environment Research Council (NERC) have highlighted an accelerating decline in numbers of harbour seals around UK coasts. Britain is home to around 40% of the European population of this species (also

Internship brings dividends

We were delighted to hear from Claire Stevenson, one of last year's PTES interns, that she has secured funding for a PhD to continue her work on red squirrels on the Solway Plain. Claire's ongoing research is to be funded jointly by the University of Cumbria and the Forestry Commission (via Forest Research).



A landscape criss-crossed by hedgerows (above left) allows the arboreal dormouse to disperse into new areas.

known as common seal).

Over the last seven years, the population of the Orkney Islands has more than halved, and the decline has been almost as severe in other parts of the country. This comes after a period where the species appeared to be doing well, making good losses caused by phocine distemper virus (PDV) which killed almost 20 000 animals in the late 1990s and returning to parts of the east coast from which it had been absent for many years (see *Mammals UK* Summer 2004).

The cause of the new decline is unclear. Harbour seals are still shot in some important fishery areas. This is legal if the seals are directly threatening stocks, but it could be that control measures are being used excessively. Disease is another possibility, as is increased competition with the grey seal, which has been doing well. The UK's grey seals represent a globally important population. It could also be that the problem is part of a wider malaise affecting the overall productivity of the North Sea – stocks of important prey fish, especially sand eels, have been decimated in recent years, with a severe knock-on effect on many seabird species, including puffins and kittiwakes.

UK waters support about 40% of the European population of the harbour or common seal, *Phoca vitulina*.



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