

Droppings – the full latrine

Droppings is a sister column to **The Big Cat Diaries**, both of which I wrote for Northumbria Mammal Group's quarterly newsletter. It ran from 2001 to 2014, though with breaks in 2003-4 and 2011-12. It's a slightly, tongue in cheek compilation of bits of mammal news, principally from North East England. Although 2001 to 2014 doesn't seem that long ago at all, reading back through them it surprised me just how much some things have changed, or at least our knowledge of them has.

Summer 2001

Bat out of Hayle

The Sunday Telegraph recently ran an article about a Greater Horseshoe bat that had turned up in North Wales. The Greater Horseshoe bat is confined to the south west of Britain and is of very high conservation importance as its population in Britain is only in the region of 3,000 individuals. This bat was about 100 miles north of its known distribution which was significant because it was thought that this species had limited powers of dispersal.

BBC local television had a report of Wild Boar damaging a golf course next to Chopwell Woods. The footage of the damaged fairway did look like a pig had been rooting around in it and, what's more, a local farmer who breeds Wild Boar admitted that one of his animals had gone AWOL. The item pointed out that there were several other Wild Boar farms in the area and speculated as to whether there might be several animals on the loose. I've never actually been to Chopwell Woods but I would think that it shouldn't be too difficult to find out if there were any Wild Boar there and it may well be that the question is answered by the time you read this. If not, it would make an interesting field excursion for some intrepid mammalogist. So if you go down to the woods today a) let NMG know what you find and b) make sure you're near a climbable tree.



Not exactly the teddy bear's picnic

Autumn 2001

Imagine a guinea pig the size of a Labrador. Then imagine that this same creature spent most of its time in or under the water. You have just pictured what may be Britain's latest alien mammal species, the Capybara. According to the Daily Mail, there have been a number of reports of this enormous rodent, loose in the Cotswolds. It has been startling water bailiffs in the river Severn and taking a dip in garden ponds. There has even been one found dead in Tewksbury. Whilst alien rodents of various kinds have generally been bad news, the capybara is unlikely to pose a huge problem. It doesn't burrow into bank sides, it would seem to occupy a totally different niche to any native species and it merely grazes on riverside vegetation for a living. (If it develops a liking for Himalayan Balsam maybe we should keep it!)

Oversexed and over here?

"DNA samples taken from pine marten road casualties in Northumberland show their origin to be from "ALASKA"!!! Martes Americana caurina from south eastern Alaska/Queen Charlotte Islands to be precise. Dr Alan Davison's son, Angus, has been doing DNA related analysis in Japan in conjunction with the Vincent Wildlife Trust and Johnny Birks, and they have found this astonishing fact about their origin. He thinks they may have come from fur farms and have surely bred with native pine martens." Kevin o'Hara

Winter 2001

"The only good possum is a dead possum!" Or so ran a campaign some years back, fronted by David Bellamy, aimed at eradicating this alien species from New Zealand. The Northern Echo ran an article at the end of September about an obliging specimen that was found as a road casualty at Riding Mill. The body was identified by a New Zealand vet who was used to seeing squashed possum. Fortunately as it turned out, we don't have to worry about this species. This particular possum was one that had escaped from Eddy Bell's collection some eighteen months earlier.

Spring 2002

It may be cold in Consett but, even so, the creature that turned up on Gerry White's doorstep last January was still a little unexpected. Gerry, a retired biology lecturer and all-round naturalist, added another new species to his life list of British mammals. Lit up by streetlight, just 15 feet from his front door was none other than an Arctic Fox.

The Arctic Fox (*Alopex lagopus*) is a completely different species to our own Red Fox. It's a good bit smaller, almost cat-like and may be predated on by the Red Fox where the two species overlap. It would normally occur no closer than Iceland, but I have seen it regularly in zoological collections and, being a fur species, it may well have been farmed in the country. Gerry saw the animal a couple of nights later but after that it disappeared, probably down a Red Fox's throat. I'm starting to run a book on what will turn up next. I'll give you 5-1 for a Chipmunk; 15-1 on a Wolverine and, for those that like to chance their luck, 500-1 on an Aardvark.

Summer 2002

Water Voles appear to be expanding their range in Darlington with the news from Mike Wallis that they are now on the Cocker Beck, in what is the most built up area of the town. There was no sign of Water Voles on the Cocker beck in 1997, when a number of sites in the town were surveyed. They are found on the Baydale Beck some 2.5km to the west and on the river Skerne which the Cocker Beck flows into. However, the banks of the River Skerne are brick-lined where it passes through this part of Darlington and the Water Voles would have had to have travelled some 800m from the nearest suitable habitat if they had colonised from this direction.

On the subject of small mammal dispersal, walking through the car park at the Castle Eden Walkway, I was amazed to see a Field Vole hurtling towards me down the path. It was going at quite a lick, although there was nothing actively pursuing it. Whilst I was watching, it covered some 80 metres, almost all of it down the middle of a gravel path and across the car park, before it disappeared into long grass. Although this is quite a bit further than the literature states that voles usually disperse, it had still some way to go to match the Wood Mouse that was captured and marked in Hamsterley Forest and subsequently recaptured in the village of Hamsterley a good 2-3 miles away. Perhaps it hitched a lift?

Another Water Shrew, this time a juvenile, was found dead on a path at Billingham Beck Ecology Park. Barn Owl pellets found at Caistron in Northumberland also revealed 2 additional Water Shrews.

Ian Robson has enjoyed sightings of Minke Whale and a large group of Dolphin from the coastline at Druridge Bay recently. Perhaps NMG should arrange a co-ordinated cetacean watch across the North East?

Durham bat group recently did a count of bats out of a roost in Witton le Wear. Over 400 bats emerged, making it the biggest recorded roost in the county.

A recent bat walk along the Hart to Haswell line in Hartlepool produced new 10 kilometre square records, at least as far as Durham Bat Group and the National Bat Atlas are concerned, for Noctule and Long-eared bats. In fact, for the Long-eared bats, this is the first record of the species that Durham Bat Group has east of Darlington.

It had always struck me as being theoretically possible that some of us with more sensitive hearing ought to be able to pick up some of the lower frequencies of bat echolocation without the aid of a bat detector. On a recent field survey in Darlington, both Jonathon Pounder and Liz Dunn from Durham Bat Group were picking up sounds from the bats before the person with the bat detector. I'm now on the look-out for someone with x-ray vision to help me find out where bats are roosting in cavity walls.

The Otter training workshop, led by Arthur West, came up with a beautiful set of prints from a dog Otter on an exposed mud bank in a small stream near Upleatham in Cleveland. There were then no signs at all for about 2 miles upstream before we eventually found an enormous Otter spraint, and a number of Mink tracks under a bridge. Being fairly new to Otter surveying, it struck me that this was an incredibly small stream to support an Otter. Only in a few places did it seem deep enough for an Otter to submerge in and scarcely deep enough to support much in the way of fish. Nevertheless, there was at least one Otter there and Arthur said that he had only once failed to find spraint under the bridge.

Autumn 2002

While running an evening event at the Castle Eden Walkway the other night, I had a strange conversation with a man who came into the visitor centre to tell me that had spent several nights filming a South African fruit Bat there. I tentatively suggested that it would be having a bit of a lean time as we didn't have any fruit trees, though I didn't mention my suspicion that there weren't any fruit bats in South Africa to start with. (I later checked and found out that none of the African fruit bats go as far south as South Africa). I'm not sure what he was filming; perhaps our owls fly a bit funnily. Bizarrely, three days before Halloween, Jonathan Pounder's dad, a solid, sober and generally clued up sort of bloke, saw two bats with a two foot wingspan flying around Hart village (for the uninitiated there ain't no such critters in those parts). I know I'm the bat recorder for the county, but it's all getting too much for me. I'm going to scrawl "Here be Dragons" on my ordnance survey map of Cleveland and keep well away of an evening.

Spring 2003

New species? Not Yeti!

I've reported on some pretty strange mammal sightings in previous editions of the newsletter, however I think the ultimate in bizarre has now been reached. For those who missed it, the Northern Echo, Jan 6th 2003, ran a front-page story about a Bigfoot that has been reported from Bolam Lake Country Park, near Belsay. According to the British Hominid Research Organisation (Oh yes, there really is one!) there have been several recent reports from this area. Apparently a large, heavily built hominid has been seen stomping around the lake and frightening the fishermen. Whilst I might admit to romantic notions of the Orang Pendek being one day discovered in the forests of Sumatra, I think a British Bigfoot is a bit much for even the most optimistic cryptozoologist. However I think there may be a rational explanation for this. Just think Kevin O'Hara and water vole survey and I'm sure you can understand the mix-up.

Winter 2003

First and, of course foremost, there are a couple of new bat records. I received a bat call to pick up a bat that had made a nuisance of itself flying around a factory in Eaglescliffe near Stockton. It turned out to be a Long-eared Bat, a species I am particularly ga-ga about, and only the second record that Durham Bat Group has from the east of Darlington. When I picked it up it had been put in a cardboard box, which had come from the company's head office down south and it did occur to me that it might have come up with the packaging. Also the bat was very grey and so I felt I should just check that it wasn't the very rare and distinctly southern, Grey Long-eared bat. It definitely wasn't, though I had to measure its tragus and thumb to know for sure. It was female which meant that I couldn't rely on the distinctively shaped penis for ID (Incidentally, the grey colour isn't that reliable, juvenile Brown Long-eareds are greyish). After checking it could fly and feeding it up for a couple of days, I returned it to darkest Eaglescliffe.

I made an interesting discovery recently when I did a bat survey of Billingham Beck Ecology Park. The ecology park is a very urban, predominantly wetland site with a couple of decent sized ponds and the Billingham Beck running through it. The beck is only 5 feet or so wide and empties into the Tees near the Newport Bridge in Middlesbrough, where it is tidal. Dave

Laing, the assistant ranger there, used to wander around the valley, some 40 years ago looking at its wildlife. Apart from qualifying as probably the only person in Billingham who didn't have a mis-spent youth, he reckoned that there were Daubentons bats there then and wanted to know if they were still there. I was sure that there wouldn't be any Daubentons, partly because the stream was so narrow there, but mostly because it was miles away from where they are known to roost on the Tees and I couldn't think of any potential roosts in between. I only went to humour him and sort out which species of Pipistrelle he had. About 15 mins after the Pipistrelles showed up, four Daubentons flew upstream, obviously en route somewhere else and another two were feeding over the main pond. There were two things that struck me from this:

1. I must get round to checking other smallish urban streams for Daubentons.
2. What do I know about bats?

(By way of a footnote, Ruth Haddon subsequently informed me that in Northumberland most of the parks with ponds have Daubentons flying round the pond.)

Just when I thought I was exhausting my discoveries of Stockton's bat fauna, I got a call to pick up a grounded bat in Stillington. To my amazement it proved to be a Whiskered Bat. My eyes not being what they were, I needed a hand lens to tell that the tragus was convex and its penis was straight. I couldn't even see the tooth P4, let alone tell whether its protocone was longer than tooth P3, nevertheless in the other respects a Whiskered rather than its near identical counterpart Brandt's bat. This makes it the third new species I've recorded in Stockton in as many weeks and the sixth in total.



The Stillington Whiskered bat (on the left) was very different in both looks and behaviour to the Common Pipistrelles (on the right) that I am used to. (Photo: Jonathan Pounder)

Gerry White has kindly sent me a couple of new Water Shrew records to add to the growing picture of their distribution. The most recent was of a dead shrew found by Gary Bell at Malton nature reserve. It was recently dead and was found about 5-6 metres from a pond. As far as anyone knows this is the first record from Malton, although Terry Coult recorded them in the Browney Valley in the 1970s. The other record was a historical one of a Water

Shrew that Gerry saw on the Halter Burn near Beamont Water in 1967, grid Ref: NT841278. This was a live animal that emerged from under the water among trailing *Ranunculus fluitans* and then climbed out of the stream.

I was talking to a couple of visitors at work about wildlife. They went to listen to the open-air concerts at Brinkburn Priory and were telling me about the bats there and how they knew that scientists had been studying the bats to see if the concerts disturbed them (some of you will remember Steve Rushton's fascinating talk on that subject). They then mentioned that whilst they were there, they were watching these little mice that climbed up the grass stems to eat the grass seeds. There's only one mouse I know of that can climb up grass stems, which means that we've probably got another record for Harvest Mouse. Now if someone could kindly tell me where Brinkburn Priory is, I'll put another dot on the map.

Even more tantalising, if such a thing could be possible, was a comment made to a colleague of mine at a recent Ferret show. The person he was talking to lived in one of the many new houses that have sprouted at New Marske. They reckoned that a Pine Marten had been visiting theirs and their neighbour's gardens. Presumably this person could tell the difference between a Pine Marten and a feral Ferret. They also knew enough to know to send the record to Jonny Birks. Could it be true? There was a freshly buried Pine Marten exhumed from the Cleveland Hills not that long ago. There is also an enormous amount of woodland in that area, including Errington Woods that directly overlooks New Marske. Methinks an expedition is called for.

Spring 2004

"Sightings of Pine Martin have come into the Tees Valley Wildlife Trust office as a result of advertising a survey to TVWT members. A report of one on the 18th May 2003 moving around through the tree tops in Errington Wood, and then another two sightings a few days later in woodland around Upleatham. Discussions before the survey showed that there have been lots of reported sightings around the Guisborough area (both recent and historical), but during the survey no confirmed evidence was found (we did find one possible dropping which has yet to be identified)."

Jonathan Pounder

X-Creatures?

According to the Northern Echo a Wolverine has been reported in the County of Durham. The creature seems to have a feeling for alliteration and turned up on moors between Rookhope and Ireshopeburn, thus becoming the Weardale Wolverine. It has been seen twice by the same motorist, who described as being a big, Ferret-like creature, almost as long as a Badger. I was alerted to the report when a correspondent in the following week's paper suggested that what they might actually have seen was a Pine Marten. I tend to agree, especially as Wolverines are bigger than Badgers. Still a Pine Marten would be a stonking good record for this area, and one that I would prefer; Wolverines are a bit extreme, even for me. I now look forward to reports of a Sabre-tooth, which will no doubt turn up in Sacriston or Satley.



It almost looks cute from that angle; a Wolverine, but not in Weardale (Photo: Ken Smith)

Autumn 2004

Natterer's silenced?

The second annual survey of the Natterer's bats at St Mary's Church, Long Newton turned up no bats on both occasions. This is the only known roost of Natterer's bats in the Tees Valley and one of only around four in the whole Durham Bat Group area (I should know this figure more accurately, after all I am the County bat recorder and four isn't a big number!) The roost has been known for many years and the bats are regularly in attendance, showering the faithful with manna from heaven. I am a little concerned as last year all of the bats were rung as part of a research project. Although it was only a small colony, I can't believe that ringing would reduce their survival chances that dramatically, but wonder if they were so hacked off that they decided on an alternative summer roost. Interestingly this year the church had a colony of common pipistrelles, a species that has not been recorded there before. Now had the pipistrelles previously been a victim of competitive exclusion, had the pipistrelles driven off the Natterer's, or is there yet another explanation.

On the positive side, Durham Bat group recently recorded 378 Common Pipistrelles from a house in Monk Hesleden. As such it is the fourth largest known bat roost in Durham. It was a maternity roost and the young had not emerged yet, which is particularly impressive as Common Pipistrelles usually form smaller roosts than Soprano Pipistrelles. Just to illustrate this, North Yorkshire Bat Group recently counted 1064 Soprano Pipistrelles out of the hanging tiles of a house at Ruislip.

There has been another record of harvest mouse from the Great Ayton area. The details are confidential, but the record would seem to be genuine.

I have recently been told of an old report of dormouse from Red Gap Wood on the former Wynyard estate, between Sedgfield and Hartlepool. Unconfirmed and no details as yet, but I will try and follow it up. Oh, and I have some interesting newt records, (but you don't want to hear about amphibians!)

Winter 2004

When Nature Calls!

I got a call on the red telephone at the beginning of October to say that a group of bats had taken up residence in the Gent's toilet at Wynyard Woodland Park. I got there to find a colony of Long-eared bats, with a snug little group of them on the ceiling over the washbasins and a single bat over the urinal. My guess was that this was a mating roost, with the harem in one group and the lucky male on his own, though whether the additional testosterone had given him any competitive advantage I'll leave for another researcher to pursue. It was quite bizarre standing there watching them, and I'm sure there were several wet legs before we closed down the toilets until such time as the bats could be persuaded to go elsewhere. This was the first ever roost of Long-eared bats that I've come across in Stockton, so I would dearly love to know where they usually hang out.

NMG member makes national news!

Speaking of bat hotlines, you may have heard that another Daubenton's bat with rabies was found in Staines, Middlesex in late September. This is now the third bat in this country to have been found to carry rabies, however to put this into context, thousands of bats will be cared for by bat workers each year and only three have ever been found to carry rabies, all of which were Daubenton's bats. Nevertheless the wearing of gloves is catching on fast among bat workers and is in fact obligatory if doing bat work for some organisations. What does a rabid bat down south have to do with Northumbria Mammal Group you might ask? Well the answer is Lynn Whitfield. Lynn is a member of Surrey Bat Group, but trained with Durham Bat Group in the late 1990s and is now, surely NMG's most southerly member. It was Lynn, along with another member of Surrey Bat Group, who got the call to pick the Daubenton's bat up. The bat was cared for by them for a couple of days before it succumbed. In spite of being appropriately kitted out with gloves whenever handling the bat, Lynn still had to have a post-exposure injection as a precaution. I'm told that this isn't anything like as painful as it used to be; you might like to write in and confirm that for the next edition Lynn.

Lynn is a big fan of the Big Cat Diaries, and at a recent bat conference we were discussing big cat sightings rather than bats. Surrey is of course famous for its Puma, which even predates (sorry pre-dates) the Durham version. I'm not sure if it has rabies but I would certainly advise her to wear gloves if she ever gets to handle it.

Spring 2005

On the Trail of the Lonesome Pine (Or a mammalogist always gets his marten!)

In his book, *The Lost Beasts of Britain*, published in 1974, Anthony Dent charts the disappearance of some of Britain's most notable fauna. He describes the Pine Marten as having vanished from England in his own lifetime. Interestingly Dent was writing from North Yorkshire, where it seems the Pine Marten is enjoying something of a resurrection.

Whilst I'd heard of the Pine Marten skull which had been exhumed from Ingleby Greenhow in 1993 (which incidentally some British mammal experts doubted as to its provenance), I was still taken by surprise by a tale that Kevin Bulmer told me a couple of years back of someone in New Marske who had apparently seen one at the bird table in their garden.

As far as I was aware at that point, Pine Martens were still something of a rumour. However in the intervening period, NMG member Derek Capes has been ferreting away (sorry!) compiling a list of Pine Marten records for North Yorkshire. It had been a while since I had been in touch with Derek, as our computers don't like to talk to each other and, when we did catch up he had something like 50+ records. Derek has subsequently been liaising with North York Moors National Park and Forestry Commission staff on this and some resultant publicity resulted in the total number of records growing to 67 by the end of last year.

The records have been classified into two groups. Those that have been vetted by the Vincent Wildlife Trust and achieved 7 or more on the "Johnny Birks-o-meter" are classed as probable and total 32 of the 67 records. The others, some of which pre-date the Vincent Wildlife Trust survey, have been classed as possible, though most of them have come from countryside professionals or experienced naturalists. Whilst some of the 67 records may be cases of mistaken identity, doubtless there will be additional records that don't have the same confidence levels attached to them because of the conditions under which the sighting occurred, but which may nevertheless still be of Pine Marten.

The records follow the highly wooded escarpment, which forms the northern, and western boundary of the North York Moors and then continue across the large plantations in Ryedale. There aren't as many records for Ryedale, but this may just be inversely related to the distance from Derek. Interestingly there aren't any records for the large wooded valleys along the east coast. The records are very well spread out, though if I had to pick a place to start looking, it would probably be in the Ingleby Greenhow/ Carlton Bank area. As this may technically be just over the border in North Yorkshire; for NMG pine marten seekers who are strictly territorial the New Marske/ Upleatham area seems to be the up and coming place for sightings and Kevin Bulmer's sources have hinted that the appropriately named "Wiley Cat Wood" might be a good bet.

Although most of the records that Derek has collected are recent, 35 this century and 16 of those in 2004, they stretch back over a period of 40 years, indicating a continuity of Pine Marten presence in this area. In fact the Proceedings of the Cleveland Naturalists Field Club, 1899-1900, records one being trapped at Swainby in March 1900. The author commented at the time that "the capture of a marten in Cleveland is very exceptional" and wondered if it had wandered there from the Lakes or further north. However the increase in sightings in the past few years may just reflect increased interest in the species compared to the situation a decade ago, rather than a burgeoning population.

You will be pleased to hear that the Bavarian Short-eared Mouse; actually a vole and more specifically *Microtus bavaricus*, has made a comeback. According to The Guardian, which ran the story, the species was last seen in 1962 and was feared extinct. The species was re-discovered in August by an Austrian scientist, Dr Spitzenberger (no, she really was called that!) whilst live-trapping in an isolated spruce forest. She was able to confirm its identity by comparing its DNA with that of a stuffed museum specimen. It is thought that the vole evolved as a result of the population being isolated during the last glaciation; its current status isn't known.

Simon Mickleburgh's talk to NMG raised a number of interesting points about bats. For me, the most interesting was that some 1100 bat species are now known. This is about a 15% increase on what all of my textbooks, some of them quite recent, have been saying. Partly this is because new species have been discovered, but a significant factor is that DNA analysis is discovering cases where what we formerly thought of as one species, turns out to

be two or more distinct species. I suspect that this “sibling species” effect will also increase the numbers of known species of other mammalian orders.

The full report of INCAs 2004 survey of the seals at Teesmouth has been produced. Jonathon Gibson has kindly allowed me to quote the following extract regarding a report of a hooded seal, though he points out that the record was not made as part of the INCA survey. *“This year a juvenile Hooded Seal, *Cystophora cristata*, was rescued by the RSPCA off the ConocoPhillips jetties. It died in transit on the way to the RSPCA centre in Norfolk. The autopsy showed rubber gloves, plastic and other debris in the seal’s stomach. It was reported that this young Hooded Seal’s mother remained around the ConocoPhillips jetties for a while after the young seal was taken away. However, INCA could not confirm any sightings. Hooded Seals are found in the north-west Atlantic from around Svalbard, past Greenland to the Canadian Arctic and Gulf of St Lawrence. Hooded Seal pups are born from mid-March to early April. It is possible that these Hooded Seals followed a fishing vessel down to the east coast of England. The Sea Mammal Research Unit (SMRU) in St Andrews report that there are usually only one or two instances of Hooded Seals off the east coast of Britain each year.”*



Juvenile Hooded Seal

A sighting of a Red Squirrel in Thorpe Bulmer Dene, Hartlepool in December confirmed that the species is still maintaining its extremely precarious hold in this woodland system. As far as is known (and I think someone would have noticed if they were anywhere else) this is the only population of reds left in Cleveland.

A probable sighting of Otter on the Claxton Beck, which forms the boundary between Stockton and Hartlepool, follows the finding last year of Otter spraint at the Reclamation Pond on nearby Teesmouth. The sighting was by Derek Clayton, who glimpsed an otter-sized animal as it leapt off the bank and disappeared underwater. From my point of view, the best part about it was that it dived in from the Hartlepool side!

A new record for the Harvest Mouse (*Micromys minutus*) has been found near Barmpton in Darlington (Grid Ref NZ316174). The find was on 28th October 2004 and was of a single

Harvest Mouse day nest in a small 5m*5m patch of reed canary grass. In February 2004 I had found what I felt sure were the remains of a Harvest Mouse nest in the same patch of grass, however it was in very poor condition and had disappeared completely when I went back to take photos a couple of weeks later.

This is the first definite record of Harvest Mouse that I have been able to trace in the area between the Tyne and the Tees since the 1980s and possibly the first ever for Darlington. However it might have been beaten to one of these records by some remains that Alistair McLee obtained from owl pellets. Alistair has been collecting Long-eared Owl pellets from the Elementis site near Urray Nook (Grid Ref NZ4014). The pellets were analysed by Mr A. Love and Harvest Mouse remains were found in some pellets from winter 2002/2003 and again from winter 2003/2004. As the Elementis site is about 2km north of the River Tees, the remains probably represent an undiscovered VC66 population of Harvest Mice.

Postscript: I think we may have found the source of the Harvest Mice in Alistair's Long-eared Owl pellets. Ian Craft from RDS asked me to look at a couple of small, isolated patches (ca 1 acre each) of damp grassland, one of which had extensive areas of Reed Canary Grass and we managed to turn up a Harvest Mouse nest. These were on the Coatham Beck at approx NZ377149. This is only 2km from Elementis and about 500m from the boundary with Darlington.

Summer 2005

Has anybody seen a Wallaby lately? Apparently the Wallaby, let's call him Wally, escaped from Elwick in Hartlepool about a month ago and was last seen heading for Trimdon. I haven't heard of any subsequent sightings or of a recapture, but I would be interested to know what has become of him as "last seen heading for Trimdon" is not the sort of epitaph I'd wish on anyone (well almost anyone).

For those of you who missed it, the press has been having great fun speculating that there are Mako Sharks out in the North Sea, preying on porpoises and dolphins (and no doubt just waiting for people to get back in the water). This follows a number of instances, 45 seems to be the general consensus, of porpoises and dolphins being washed up on north-east beaches with large bite marks out of them. There are of course other, slightly less dramatic, explanations such as seals or Porbeagle Sharks snacking on already deceased cetaceans. It does seem that something "different" is happening out there, but for all I know 45 small cetaceans with bites out of them may actually be the norm for a particular period of time.

I had an interesting call from the local spiritualist church earlier this year. They thought that they had bats as something was setting the motion sensors off on a night. Trying not to think about the alternative explanations, Jonathon and I investigated and were very relieved to find that the things that were going bump in the night were actually bats.

Scientists have found the fossilised remains of a mammal from 130 million years ago. It was exceptional, not just for its age but because the animal had been the size of a dog. Previously it was thought that early mammals were all small and shrew-like and didn't diversify until after the dinosaurs disappeared. The mammal, named *Repenomamas giganticus* was more than a metre long, and was squat and carnivorous and would have resembled today's Tasmanian Devil. Its much smaller relative, *R. robustus*, has been found

with the fossil of a baby dinosaur in its stomach, suggesting that *R giganticus* may have also preyed on dinosaurs.

Autumn 2005

A golfer on the sixth hole of the gold course at Bishop Auckland got a surprise when a Red Squirrel ran across the grass in front of him. The sighting, reported in the Northern Echo on June 2nd, prompted another person to write in to say that they had also seen a red squirrel in that area. As far as I am aware, it's been a long time since Bishop Auckland had any Red Squirrels; in fact, though I hope I'm wrong, I understand that the last population in Weardale, at Hamsterley Forest, has now disappeared. What I suspect they saw was a red-tinged Grey Squirrel, though if you're a golf-playing mammal enthusiast then it just might be worth a round or two at Bishop.

Since the last edition there have been two further records of Water Shrew in the Tees Valley. The first was discovered by me at Drinkfield Marsh in Darlington as part of the national Water Shrew survey (which means I found a dropping rather than saw the animal). The second was by Pam Stewart as part of a mammal trapping exercise on one of the brinefields at the Tees estuary.

The numbers and species of bats under Hart to Haswell tunnel in Hartlepool continue to fluctuate, doubtless as part of a plan to perplex bat workers who like to think they understand what's happening. On a visit in April, the number of Long-eared bats had risen to 10, the highest recorded there. There was also a single Natterer's bat, only the second roost record for the species in Cleveland. At the following visit at the end of May, there were 10-12 Natterer's and only 2 Long-eared. As the tunnel is very cold for a summer roost, I've no idea why the Natterer's moved in. Noel Sharpe suggested that this might be due to a little studied phenomenon known as "Deciduous Bat Syndrome" whereby Long-eared bats shed their outer ears and resemble *Myotis* species of bats, and who am I to contradict him?

A new species of bat for Britain was recorded in Britain last year with the discovery of a Pond Bat, *Myotis dasycneme*, in Kent. Whilst several, non-resident species of bat have been recorded as vagrants or stowaways in Britain over the years, the difference with the Pond Bat is that it is found widely on the western fringe of continental Europe and is a very mobile species. As such, I had hoped that it would colonise Britain and wondered if it might not be here already as it is essentially a larger version of the widespread Daubenton's bat. I don't know how easy it is to distinguish from Daubenton's, but I'd better find out as I predict that this individual will be the first of quite a few of its species to be found here.

I got a nice letter back from Lewis McDondald, Minister for the Environment in the Scottish Parliament in response to my letter asking him to licence the trial re-introduction of the European Beaver to Knapdale. He is still considering the situation. I've just got back from week's holiday in Knapdale; as I recall the main tourist attractions were a stone circle and a couple of gardens consisting largely of Rhododendrons. The chance of seeing a Beaver would have acted like a tourist magnet. I can see the car stickers now; "I've had a Beaver in Knapdale".

Speaking of mammal twitching, on our way to the same family holiday I passed what was a very convincing dead "Polecat" on the A66 where the road rises at Bowes Cross, which is always a reliable source of road kill. Of course, the only way to ensure that it was a Polecat,

and not a very dark Polecat-ferret, is to collect the carcase and keep it until you can send it off for expert analysis. There are some things you just know not to ask!

Herpetological Heresy

At the risk of having the mammal group committee excommunicate me, I just had to share three herptile records that could redefine some distribution maps. First, an Adder was collected by the RSPCA from a street in Hesleden, east County Durham. I suspect this was planted, as I believe it was the first record for East Durham, though it was next to the Hart to Haswell Walkway and suitable habitat. Second, Derek Clayton told me about a Grass Snake he had found in Thorpe Bulmer Dene, Hartlepool, again next to the Hart to Haswell Walkway, in 1961. Finally, the nature reserve at Elementis Chromium has four species of newt: all three natives plus Alpine Newt. This is the second, or possibly third, site for this species in Stockton, though none of them are mentioned in any notes on non-native species distribution that I've come across.

Winter 2005

When I was a kid, I wanted to be Daktari. When I was a young man, I wanted to be Carl Lewis. Now that I am spiralling towards the black hole that is middle-age, I want to be Stephen Murray. For those of you who don't know him, Stephen Murray is someone who runs for miles along the River Tees. So effortlessly does he cover the ground that he has time to watch Otters or a Porpoise disporting itself under Newport Bridge. You notice I said Otters (plural). Not for him the once in a lifetime, fleeting glimpse of an Otter that most of us hope for. No, he manages to see both of the Otters that are now resident near the Tees Barrage, at the same time! And this wasn't just any Porpoise; it was possibly the only Porpoise that has been recorded this far up the Tees in living memory. As I didn't end up being Daktari or Carl Lewis, I probably won't end up being Stephen Murray, but I can dream.

DEFRA are currently consulting on the future of Wild Boar in Britain. Options could range from exterminating the current population to allowing them to expand their range and numbers naturally with no intervention. The latter is probably not a realistic option but personally, I'd want to try and ensure that the former didn't happen. By way of background, there are between 300-500 Wild Boar loose in Britain at present, virtually all of them in three main populations, which are in the Kent/Sussex border, Dorset and Herefordshire. These populations result from boar that have escaped, thus taking re-introduction into their own hands rather than wait for the government to consider the possibility of a small-scale trial (after Stephen Murray, those pigs are my heroes!) The consultation document and background information can be found on the DEFRA website and they would like to know what we think!

The bandit that broke into a pigeon loft in Lincolnshire earlier this year, killing 13 pigeons, turned out to be a Raccoon. The Raccoon was shot by the pigeon fancier and the body later photographed by the Lincolnshire Echo. Hopefully this was just an isolated escapee as the species has the propensity to become well established here in the absence of its natural predators such as pumas.

On the theme of masked invaders, a Garden Dormouse was found in Kent last year. This species has a significant ecological difference to our two existing species of Dormouse in that it is much more insectivorous. It is found across much of Western Europe and would have probably been native had it got its skates on when the ice melted.

Tony Martin's team has recorded Noctule/Leisler's bats north of Inverness in June/July. This is over 100km further north than the species had previously been recorded, at least according to the 2000 BCT bat distribution atlas. The bats were only recorded in June or July however, which would perhaps imply that there is at least some level of bat migration happening in the British Isles.

As you're no doubt aware, the best advertising schemes are those that make the product's drawback seem like its greatest asset. I came across an excellent example of this recently with a slug pellet that gave you the opportunity of getting a Hedgehog box for your garden. Obviously taken with this, the lady in front of me in B&Q bought three large tubs. Perhaps if you collect enough tokens you can get a Hedgehog hospital suitably equipped with a stomach pump.

Recent radio-carbon dating of Lynx bones found over 100 years ago have brought the species' history in Britain that bit closer to modern times. It used to be thought that the Lynx became extinct in Mesolithic times c3500bp, but in recent years a Lynx bone from Scotland was carbon dated to c1800bp. The latest findings, sponsored by the Yorkshire Dales National Park Authority were on bones from two caves near Settle, one of which was dated to c1800bp and the other to c1500bp. The findings also shed light on a seventh century poem, which mentions a game animal from Cumbria called the llewyn. Although originally thought to be the Lynx this was dismissed because Lynx was assumed to be extinct then. This now appears not to have been the case and brings the Lynx up to medieval times. The find is significant because it lends weight to the idea that the Lynx died out due to anthropogenic factors rather than changes in climate. If that is the case, the government is obliged under the EC habitats Directive to consider its reintroduction. I think you know where I'm going with this.

Spring 2006

It's nice to be able to report on a world record and the Journal of Gerontology has recently announced that the new record for the longest lived bat is 41 years and is now held by a Brandt's bat. The previous record was 36 years by an American species, the Little Brown bat. Yes, I know they are nearly all little and brown; can't help feeling that they could have been a tad more imaginative with the English Language. (Still to give them some credit, they also have a Big Brown bat). Whilst I don't know the nationality of this particular bat, Brandt's bat is native to Britain and, in fact, the north-east has more known roosts of this species than any other region in Britain. Both Brandt's bat and the Little Brown bat are tiny (c10g) which makes me wonder if, with size and longevity often having some proportionality, the bigger bat species may potentially be even longer-lived.

A study by scientists at Syracuse University in the States has come up with a rather disturbing conclusion. The study examined 334 species of bat and found that brain size was inversely proportional to testicle size. The mechanism driving this dichotomy is apparently promiscuousness in female bats. In those species where females are promiscuous, it pays male bats to invest more in sperm production. As this is energetically expensive, something had to go and in bats it seems that that something was brain size. The report, in the Times, didn't say whether the females of those species had larger brains than the males (I suspect that 50% of the readership felt that they knew the answer to that anyway!) After I e-mailed the article around the bat group, John Hutchinson sent me a very explicit photo of a male Egyptian Fruit Bat, which by this definition must surely be the world's thickest bat. I shudder

to think what he put in the search engine to find the picture. The study postulated that the same principle could apply to primates. I think 50% of us are sincerely hoping it doesn't!

The December edition of BBC Wildlife magazine ran a five-page article about a group of Siberian Chipmunks that were living in Wellington Country Park in Hampshire. On reading the article it turned out that they had just escaped from the Parks' animal farm and that they had all been recaptured (But hey, we've all been short of copy). The species has a natural distribution that extends westward into Eastern Europe, but in recent years it has become established as an exotic in France & Belgium where it is increasing at a phenomenal rate. It surprises me that it hasn't become established in Britain. There was a bit of a craze for them in the early 90s, when the price per Chipmunk dropped from around £80 to £15 within the period of about a year. Having bred them myself, and having spent many a curse-reverberating hour chasing them around my shed, trying to get them back in their cage, I cannot believe there is anything in the known universe with such a propensity for escaping. So why have they established on the continent and not here? Purely idle speculation of course, but I wonder if those bolshy, American tree rats have usurped all the squirrel-type niches in this country.

The same edition of BBC Wildlife Magazine also ran a big article on the Eagle owls that are breeding near Richmond. What it didn't mention was that a pair of Eagle owls also bred near Alnwick last year. (Just remembered, Eagle Owls aren't mammals – hope no one noticed!)

Another introduction that hit the news recently was the escape of 100 Wild Boar from a farm in Devon. Forty were recaptured fairly promptly, but at the time of writing the remaining 60 were still at large. Well actually, only 59 are at large. A high profile recapture attempt, involving the local hunt, farmers and Uncle Tom Cobbly tried in a spectacularly unsuccessful fashion to round them up again, but only succeeded in catching one. One elderly participant interviewed on the telly, it might have been Uncle Tom Cobbly actually, said that he was hoping to catch one of the boar by the leg whilst his friend put it in a sack. Given his age, it is likely that this gentleman will have passed his genes on, which is lucky for him as the gene for grabbing wild boar by the leg is one of those that natural selection tends to weed out of the population fairly rapidly. The story concluded by saying that the boar would now have to be shot, but as they may well have now been scattered to the four corners of Devon, it remains to be seen how effective that will be.

There have been several reports of a large Bigfoot-like hominid in the province of Johar in Malaysia recently. Apparently government officials and the Malaysian Nature Society, whilst not necessarily believing them, are taking them seriously and investigating them. Nearer to home I have had no more reports of a large, Bigfoot-like hominid stomping around the backwaters in Northumberland, but then Kevin O'Hara's "Researching Ratty" project has now finished ☺.

At the other end of the size spectrum, last year saw the discovery of bits of skeleton of five more specimens of *Homo floresiensis*, the 3' tall *Homo erectus*-like hominid that once inhabited the island of Flores. This lends support to the theory that this represents a new species rather than a stunted individual. The most recent fossil is from c13000bp, but local legends have it that it occurred until much more recently.

Last year seemed to be a particularly good one for mammalian cryptozoology with several new species being discovered including: two new Mouse Lemurs from Madagascar; a new

Mangabey monkey from Tanzania and a new dolphin species from Australia. Not to mention the mystery animal from Borneo with the impossibly long tail, which is probably a civet of some type. However, perhaps the most remarkable species to be found is a large rodent found on a meat stall in Laos, which was named Laonestes and/or Rock Rat. It is particularly surprising because it is most closely related to chinchillas and guinea-pigs, which are of course South American, but it was sufficiently different from other rodents to be given its own family, the first new mammalian family since the discovery of the Bumblebee bat twenty years ago.

Meanwhile back in Hartlepool, the tunnel under the Hart to Haswell Walkway turned up a Common Pipistrelle early this month, which makes a total of four different bat species having been recorded as using it for hibernation. I'm sure this must be some sort of record.

Summer 2006

Another stray Raccoon has made an appearance, this time in North Wales. The animal, which turned up some 15 miles from home was caught and re-united with its owners several weeks after escaping. Could it be that we are turning into a nation of careless Raccoon owners? I can just see the next reality TV show on Channel 4; two stern American ladies lecture members of the public on how to be model Raccoon owners, including ensuring that their animals wash their hands whilst eating their food.

The government recently announced a plan for a concerted effort to cull Grey Squirrels. Well they sort of did; then they seemed to retract it a bit. It seems that Grey Squirrels are much too cuddly and well loved to be eradicated completely, so the plan is to have a more targeted approach in areas where forestry damage is high, or in buffer zones around red squirrel reserves. In the House of Lords they seem to be taken up the cause with some gusto. Lord Inglewood said: "What about celebrity chefs like Jamie Oliver promoting (the grey) for school dinners? Indeed the House authorities could put it on the menu here." He went on to say: "Don't let's forget that a number of things we eat as a matter of course are entirely loveable creatures and they appeal to the wider world. What's the difference?"



Grey Squirrel doing its best to look cuddly and loveable (Photo: Ken Smith)

Some more good news for Red Squirrels is the award of £626,000 by the Heritage Lottery Fund to the Red Alert North England partnership. Meanwhile on a very, localised scale, Joe Davies tells me that Red Squirrels were still being reported at Castle Eden Dene until recently and are still thought to be present there, although their continuing existence must be incredibly perilous.

Another 35 Wild Boar have been released in Devon. This was from the same farm in South Moulton as the release reported in the last edition. In January, 100 Wild Boar were released, of which about half were recaptured and 22 were shot. The remainder are assumed to be roaming free. By my reckoning this second release makes about 70 Wild Boar loose in Devon with the farrowing season underway.

Whilst the release of Wild Boar into Britain is being seen by some as a plus for conservation, their release into New Zealand has been an unmitigated disaster as they chew their way through a native ground flora and fauna totally unadapted for such an onslaught. Fortunately those resourceful New Zealand folk are on the case. Alistair McLee recently sent me a cutting from a New Zealand newspaper with the heading "One hundred and one things to do with a dead pig (or one hundred and two if your name's Bruce!)". It featured the ultimate piggyback race, where large New Zealand blokes strapped even larger dead Wild Boar to their backs and took part in an obstacle race, which included negotiating barbed wire fences. (Is it any wonder we can't beat them at rugby?) To give this a Northumbrian angle, I think we should launch a column called "One hundred and one things to do with a dead Grey Squirrel". For activity No 1 we could have Jamie Oliver telling us *how* to stuff a Grey Squirrel, whilst for No 2, I could tell Jamie Oliver *where* to stuff it. I'm hoping for many more original suggestions from you for the other 99; who knows, perhaps there's a grant for the winning suggestion.

Autumn 2006

The recovery of the Otter seems to be continuing unabated. The one that had the misfortune to be run over on the road near Durham Wildlife Trust headquarters at Rainton Meadows was the first to be recorded in that area since the 1960s. The River Tees Otters have also been busy and an Otter has now been seen on the Lustrum Beck in the heart of urban Stockton. In fact, if a couple of reports from Alistair McLee are anything to go by, they could be starting to make a nuisance of themselves. A pair of Otters on the River Tees were "playing" within a couple of rod lengths of a fisherman and consequently put all the fish off his peg, whilst on the same stretch of river two Swans were so agitated by an Otter that they tried to take off vertically like Teal – singularly unaccomplished however.

Speaking of aquatic nuisances the Evening Gazette reported that a recent study by the Centre of Environment, Fisheries and Aquaculture Science has shown that 49% of a sample of tagged Salmon and Sea Trout on the River Tees had been eaten by seals. The study was supposed to be looking at the effectiveness of the "fish pass" at the Tees Barrage, which anglers claimed was too narrow and bottled up the fish making them easy targets for the seals. It was pointed out by the Environment Agency that this was just a snapshot and that a more detailed study was needed.



At least none of it is going to waste. (Photo: Jerry Drewett)

One possible solution to the above problem is to replace the seals with cows; these would leave the fish alone and might have the additional benefit of grazing off the *Enteromorpha* algae, which is smothering Seal Sands. The idea came to me after a report last week about a herd of cows in Cumbria that for some reason just casually wandered into the sea and kept swimming until they landed in Scotland a distance, as the cow swims, of some five miles. For a terrestrial mammal not given to aquatic tendencies this struck me as very impressive but rather inexplicable. Assuming that they weren't doing it for Sport Relief or fleeing religious persecution, why would they just up and head across the sea? Did they know there was land out there; after all if you miss Scotland, Canada is your next port of call? Were they originally from Scotland and hence were homing cows? Whatever the answer, I shall treat cows with a lot more respect in future.

Another supposedly, non-British, European bat has turned up in this country. This time it was a Parti-coloured Bat, which is distinctively coloured, as you might gather from the name. This individual was small for its species and it was therefore assumed that it was a juvenile, leading to speculation that its mother had migrated here, given birth, and then returned back to the continent. Personally I'm not sure that this speculation is justified as the bat was found in the spring by which time it would have been several months old and adult size. I think it's more likely that it was still underweight after hibernation. Parti-coloured Bats are a migratory species and there have been around 10 records in Britain in the past 100 years or so, including two in the North East of which one is held at Bowes Museum. To strengthen my theory that this was a European bat that had migrated here, this particular bat was found in the rafters of a thatched cottage watching line dancers; I can't imagine any self-respecting British bat watching line dancing!

Closer to home, Hartlepool, and, as far as I am aware Cleveland County, has had its first record of Soprano Pipistrelle bat, although in both cases just by a few tens of metres. One or possibly two bats were recorded around Thorpe Bulmer Dene at the end of May.

In a bid to further our knowledge of bats and other mammals in County Durham, Durham bat Group did the first of the “Bats & Roadside Mammals Surveys” in early June. For the uninitiated this consists of driving round country roads at 15mph in the middle of the night with a flashing beacon on the roof and a bat detector stuck on the window whilst the passengers scan the roads for mammals or flattened bits of mammals. The first trip was plotted, purely by co-incidence you understand, to go straight through the heart of Trimdon Panther country. Well, you never say never! We were at the very least expecting to fill in several new tetrads with squashed bunnies. Whilst not wanting to put off any of you who might wish to help with future surveys, I can report that we drove for an hour and a half around some of the most rural spots in East Durham and came up with a total of zero bits of flattened fur, with our only live mammals being a Ferret and a bloke out walking his dog. To add to the frustration the ferret was about 100m outside of the Hartlepool boundary where it would probably have been a new district record. (If any undaunted NMG members would still like a ride in the world’s slowest bat mobile, please drop me an email).

You may recall that in the last edition I was asking for 101 suggestions for uses for dead grey squirrels. Suggestion number 3 is from Alistair McLee who apparently drops a couple of them in the hole as fertiliser when planting new trees. A very practical and poetic use I thought, though I suspect some future archaeologist doing a thesis on “the politics and practice of tree planting in late C20 Cleveland” will imbue it with some more ritualistic symbolism.

It would seem that my mammalian taxonomy is stuck in the seventies (along with the rest of me) if a recent report in the New Scientist is anything to go by. Having always believed that bats evolved from insectivores, then got used to the idea that some of them might have evolved from primates and then to the idea that they probably all evolved from insectivores after all, it now appears that they belong to a super-order Pegasoferae which includes cows, horses, whales, cats and dogs. Within this group a study of DNA mutations has shown that only cats and dogs are more closely related to horses than bats are. Now I do usually take these reports with a pinch of salt and wondered if this was maybe overplaying the evidence, however Rob Pollard was in no doubt that this was true and, what’s more, sent me the following picture to prove it!



The Great Bear Diaries (like the Big cat Diaries, only shaggier)

From previous columns, you may be aware that I am in favour of re-introducing extinct British fauna, where this is ecologically feasible. However even I have great reservations about the feasibility of re-introducing bears. Bears are particularly problematic because, not only are they bigger than us with carnivorous tendencies, but they require huge territories and we are one of the most crowded countries in the world. From recent news items it would seem that conserving bears is fraught with difficulty across their range.

A re-introduction of bears into the French Pyrenees has been dogged with controversy with strong local opposition, particularly from farmers, leading to the project being temporarily suspended. Bears became extinct in France in the 1980s, but three bears were released in 1996, one of which is alleged to have killed 165 sheep last year. A further two bears from Slovenia were released recently, with a further three releases planned. In spite of the continued opposition France's Council of State, the highest administrative body in the country, has now ruled that the reintroduction can go ahead as France had pledged to protect the bears as part of an international convention.

The first bear to be seen in Germany for 170 years was shot recently in Bavaria. The bear, a young male from an Italian programme to re-introduce bears into the Alps, was shot because it had killed seven sheep and raided a chicken coop and the State Authorities had decided that its search for food was taking it closer to inhabited areas. Apparently the World Wildlife Fund agreed that the bear could not be left as it was too dangerous, but the European Nature Heritage Fund expressed regret at the shooting saying "We consider the decision by the Bavarian government to be wrong, because it was based only on the fact that the bear was getting close to human habitation...If this is to be the yardstick for the right to life for brown bears then the outlook is bleak for European bears."

A story with a happier ending occurred in Vancouver recently when, in a reversal of the Goldilocks story, a householder came home to find a bear in her house eating the porridge, well oatmeal. Rather worryingly the bear didn't flee on the owner's return (presumably it still had to try the chairs out). The police were called but decided to let the bear continue its meal and vacate the area under its own steam as it wasn't aggressive and wasn't destroying the house.

Polar Bears are also having a hard time these days. Global warming is resulting in less ice in the Arctic and hence many bears are either starving or drowning. Perhaps a measure of their desperate plight is found in the news that a bear, which was recently shot in Northern Canada, turned out to be the first recorded occurrence of a hybrid Polar/Grizzly bear in the wild. The bear, which was termed, somewhat unimaginatively, a Pizzly bear, had the creamy fur of a polar bear, but the shoulder hump, long claws and shallow face of a grizzly bear. Although polar and grizzly bears are very different in their appearance, habitat and even the time of year they mate, geneticists have estimated that the two species only split some 250,000 years ago.

As if bears didn't have enough problems, the British Army has decided to continue using real bearskins for the Guards regiments. In spite of extensive efforts it would seem that they can't find a synthetic fur that doesn't get waterlogged on rainy days. I find it a bit difficult to believe that one of the world's military superpowers can't do waterproof hats; my mam has a perfectly serviceable plastic scarf (with little flowers on it) that keeps the rain off a treat. In fact I think the Queen has a similar model; perhaps they could all wear them at the trooping of the colour, it might save a few bears.

You may recall in the last edition of the Big Cat Diaries that I was fooled by a large, black cuddly toy into thinking I'd found the remains of the Trimdon Panther. Well believe it or not, only two days later and a few miles up the road on the A689 I saw a 3 foot tall Winnie the Pooh flat on its back on the road verge. As I say, this just isn't a safe world for bears.

Winter 2006

As a follow up to the "Great Bear Diary" in the last edition, there has been some good news and some bad news for the re-introduction of bears into the French Pyrenees. The good news is the release this year of a further five bears to bolster the existing population which is thought to number just 14-18. The bears were translocated from Slovenia, which has one of the strongest populations of bears in Europe with an estimated population of around 550. The bad news is that one of the bears has been found dead after an apparent fall from a cliff. Opponents of the translocation have argued that the Slovenian bears are not adapted to the rocky landscapes of the Pyrenees and that this had led to the accident. (Quite where in the genome the gene for not falling off cliffs was located was not speculated on!)

By pure co-incidence (at least I'm giving them the benefit of the doubt) the BBC broadcast their own "Big Bear Diary" recently in which they sent their Wildlife Whisperers (aka presenters) in pursuit of bear "dramas" in North America. More used to big cats and elephants, the Whisperers seemed a bit puzzled by the bear's behaviour. "This bear seems really stressed," said one of them who had been pursuing it round the island all week. She was further puzzled when the bear put its paw up in front of its face. "I've never seen behaviour like this before," said the perplexed Whisperer. Those of us watching at home, however, could clearly see the two claws sticking up.

Getting back to re-introductions, wolves have also been making a bit of a comeback in Germany, only under their own steam. About 20 wolves in two packs now live in the state of Brandenburg, which is part of the former East Germany. Wolves were wiped out in Germany a century ago but as parts of this state are being de-populated due to political and economic changes the wolves have been able to move in from Poland.

Impatient with the lack of progress on re-introducing extinct animals to Britain, a group called the Wild Beasts Trust has decided to take matters into their own hands. According to the Daily Mail the group intends to release a number of species that have become extinct including moose, lemmings and walrus. More pertinently it was claimed that the group had purchased a number of lynx and wolves, which they intend to release in Northumberland. So don't be surprised if the Wildlife Trust's goats start disappearing.



Surely that's just cotton wool in the background. Coming soon to a NE postcode?
(Photo: Ken Smith)

Whilst not as extreme as bringing back wolves or walrus' (is the plural Walri?) the re-establishment of Wild Boar is still causing plenty of controversy. Defra have now published the results of their consultation on Wild Boar in Britain. Of the 284 responses received 56% wanted to keep them in some form and 80% felt that there should be some form of management of the populations. The form of management with the most support was eradication, with 44% of the total respondents asking for this, mainly on grounds of animal health. Curiously, given that they have a published statement on this, the Mammal Society doesn't appear to have responded to the consultation. Defra is due to announce its future policy with regards to Wild Boar later in the year.

One of the respondents to the Wild Boar consultation considered that it was now too late to eradicate the Boar. I find this a bit unlikely given that we managed it in the thirteenth century before we'd invented firearms, but Wild Boar do seem to be popping up more widely than Defra statistics show. The Wigan News has reported sightings of a Wild Boar sow and piglets near Standish and I recently received a phone call (about a possible big cat print) from South Wales from a man who had a regularly spot where he hunted for deer and Wild Boar. (Incidentally, the footprint turned out to be dog, an enormous dog granted, but definitely a dog).

If Lynx and Wolves do get released into Northumberland there may be some additional varieties of herbivorous mammals for them to prey on. First there was the case of the Were-Rabbit at Felton. This apparently giant lagomorph, which plagued allotment holders, was described as having footprints bigger than those of deer and taking big bites out of turnips (so just a rabbit then!) Now there has been a sighting of an even bigger animal near Eyemouth. The animal, dubbed the Beast of Berwickshire, was described as being like a guinea-pig, only 2' tall when sat on its haunches. With that description, the most likely suspect is an escaped Capybara. These animals can be the size of a golden Labrador and

weigh over 100lbs, so if you are doing a spot of mammal trapping In Northumberland can I suggest taking some scales instead of a Pesola balance.

Somewhat closer to the real world, a survey commissioned by Pets at Home found that half of North-East households had seen bats in their gardens, with just over a third of households seeing a squirrel and a similar number a hedgehog.

There have been two separate sightings of Pine Martens in Hamsterley Forest this year. One was near Blackling Hole at the SW corner of the forest and the other by Malcolm and Jenny Gallimore, on or about 10 September at the NE corner near Sharnberry. Added to this, Derek Capes has recently had an unconfirmed report of a Pine Marten in Guisborough Forest.

The Bats & Roadside Mammals survey in County Durham has had a bit more success with the Roadside Mammals side of it. The survey in Darlington saw 6 rabbits, 3 badgers and a dead rat; whilst the survey in Sunderland found a squashed hedgehog and 3 cats, all of them black (is that they only kind of cat you are allowed in Sunderland?)

Finally and serendipitously in view of the forthcoming talk by Wendy Fail, there have been several new Harvest Mouse records in the Tees Valley area. Firstly Don Griss was sent the corpse of a male Harvest Mouse that had been killed during harvesting operations at a farm just east of Sadberge on the Darlington/Stockton border. Durham Wildlife Trust then received a report of a Harvest Mouse nest in a road verge near Sedgfield. Meanwhile in Great Ayton, Derek Capes' neighbour's cat brought back a Harvest Mouse and at Urray Nook, the pellets that Alistair McLee collects from Long eared Owls have again turned up a couple of harvest mouse remains. All of these records are from places near where Harvest Mice have previously been recorded, though in the case of Sedgfield I don't know of any records since the 1960s.

Monkey Magic

As the publication date for this edition of the newsletter co-incides with the third anniversary of my sojourn as an ecologist at Hartlepool, I thought it would be good to mark it with an article on primates.

As I'm sure is well known, Hartlepool is famous for its claim to have hung a monkey during the Napoleonic Wars because they thought it was a French spy. I used to think that Hartlepudlians would be sensitive about this episode in their history and, when first arriving there I kept repeating to myself "don't mention the monkey!" It turns out that the locals are quite proud of the episode and are happy to talk about it "as long you don't make fun of the monkey." Now why would it be the monkey that I would be making fun of?

Not all intra-primate homicide is one-way. Alistair McLee's wife was researching family history connections for people who were killed overseas and came across the sad case of Lt G Turner of the East Indian Company's 38th Native Indians. The note on his file listed him as "killed by a stone thrown by a monkey."

The similarity between humans and apes, particularly chimpanzees, has been emphasised in recent years with a figure of 98.5% similarity in the genetic make-up of the two species, thus making chimps closer to humans than they are to gorillas and leading to the description of us as the "third chimpanzee". Recent research published in Nature by David Reich of Harvard Medical School suggests that the link might be closer still as different sections of the

two species' chromosomes differ by varying amounts, with the X chromosome being most similar. This suggests to the researchers that there was a hybridisation between the two species for a significant period of time after the species split.

Another study, published in *Current Biology*, and looking at chimp behaviour has found that they have adapted their behaviour to cope with a difficult man-made situation, that of crossing roads. The study in Guinea, West Africa found that the males would take up positions at the front and rear of the group whilst they crossed over the roads. This is similar to the behaviour that they exhibit when faced with other threatening situations. Whilst this shows the intelligence to adapt to new situations, the chimps still differ from humans in that they didn't fill out a risk assessment first.

By way of comparing chimps and humans (and for once I'm not being purposely facetious) it has been interesting to watch both *Chimp Week* and *Big Brother*. In *Big Brother* the humans once out of their normal environment and in what is effectively a zoo started to act in a remarkably similar way to the chimps. They spend much of the day lounging around aimlessly with occasional bouts of grooming and formed little alliances over food and other commodities; there was even the odd burst of pant-hooting. I really did find it hard to work out where the one and a half percent was.

For some time now there have been reports coming out of the Democratic Republic of Congo about a giant species of primate, the so-called Billi Ape. These apes, which do actually exist, would appear to be up to 100kg, have feet longer than those of gorillas and differ from chimps in having a sagittal crest and making ground nests. Whilst there has been proof for some time of their existence, there has been much speculation as to what they are, including them being a chimp-gorilla hybrid or even a totally new species of ape. New research reported in the *New Scientist* and based on DNA samples from their droppings now suggests that, in spite of these morphological and behavioural differences, they belong to a recognised, sub-species of chimp, *Pan troglodytes schweinfurthii*. Bummer!

Those of us whose cryptozoological romanticism has been crushed by the taxonomic orthodoxy of the Billi Ape can take heart from the tale of a possible Bigfoot sighting in Virginia USA. Reports of Bigfoot are, of course, nothing new but this report differs in that it was by a group of ecologists doing bat surveys. I'll leave the story in the observer's own words: *"I would like to preface this report with a small fact: I have always wanted to see a Bigfoot. I truly believe that I have, based on what I saw tonight. I work for a monitoring lab that conducts late-night bat surveys. Very recently we were commissioned to do a survey to look for Myotis sodalis, the Indiana bat. We had to make sure that the bats were not roosting on an active mine site. On the second night of our 6-day survey, my co-worker and I were going to check one of the nets when we heard a very loud whooping howl nearby (within 30 feet of where we were standing). It was late at night, probably around 1:30 in the morning. At first I thought the sound was a person, trying to scare us by making howling noises. After the creature vocalized a second time, however, I knew the noise wasn't made by a man. I refused to move from my spot, scanning the tree line with my light. I didn't see anything then, but I heard rustling in the woods of something large moving.*

The next night I was on a different part of the survey, but 2 more of my co-workers were in the same area I was in the night before. They told us at the end of our shift that they had heard noises in the woods, and saw a place that had been trampled down by something much larger than a deer or bear. Finally, on the last night of our survey, I was back in the area I heard the noise on the second day. I was in a good mood, because I hadn't heard any

strange noises since that first one. As I went to check the nets with 2 of my co-workers at around 2:30 in the morning (in the same area as before) I heard a single, high-pitched "whoop". I jumped but was prepared, and shone my light in the direction of the noise. About 40 yards in front of us, a large bipedal creature crossed the road. It was tall, probably around 7 feet, and was completely covered in short, coarse-looking black hair except for its face, which was brown. The creature looked at the 3 of us as it crossed the road, took two steps, and was gone up the embankment on the other side. The 3 of us ran back to my truck, where one of my co-workers grabbed a machete. When my boss and another technician showed up, the 5 of us walked to where I had seen the Bigfoot. In the mud were 2 distinct footprints, each much larger than any of our shoes. In the direction that the Bigfoot had walked in was trampled down grasses and broken twigs, as if something very big had moved quickly through the brush. We promptly packed up our nets and left, all of us were extremely scared. I plan on going back soon and trying to extract as much evidence as I can find."

I have to admit, I struggled a bit to find an up to date Hartlepool monkey story to round this off with, so was very pleased when on 7th August a Minke was sighted off Hartlepool Headland. I will of course be checking whether they have a licence for it!

Spring 2007

I was flattered to see that the BBC has again been using my articles as a basis for their television programmes. This time it was the turn of Horizon, a programme that I generally find a little dull, long-winded and inconclusive, to look at the issue of whether chimps were really humans. The programme was considerably enlivened (just long-winded and inconclusive to go) by being presented by the comedian Danny Wallace who tried to persuade a number of chimpanzee experts to confess that chimps should be classed as people. To his disappointment most of the experts concluded that the fraction of a percent of DNA that divides our two species still equated to quite a significant difference and that chimps and humans were different things (so, to be fair, just a tad on the long side in the end.) It did however remind me of my favourite bit of chimp docu-drama. This was set some years ago at the famous research site at Gombe and featured the two brothers Freud and Frodo. Freud had led the group for some time, was of a relatively calm demeanour and had ruled by building up good relations with the female members of the troop. His younger brother Frodo was physically stronger and his stock in trade was thumping other chimps and thrashing trees. It seemed inevitable that Frodo would wrest control from Freud by force but, on the day Frodo made his move, the female chimps gathered around Freud to support him and Frodo was unable to gain control. Two things struck me about this episode. Firstly that this was a simple form of democracy, the female chimps were in effect choosing their leader, and secondly, if chimps can choose their leader on the basis of experience and diplomacy, why on earth can't Americans.

Speaking of the down-side to Americans, the Grey Squirrel has been further indicted on crimes against British wildlife by a recent study, sponsored by the British Trust for Ornithology, into breeding and survival rates of Spotted Flycatchers in woodlands and gardens. According to the BTO almost a third of woodland species have declined by more than half in the past 30 years with Spotted Flycatchers in particular declining by 83%. The study showed that survival rates dropped from 75% to 25% when predators weren't controlled. Whilst the study didn't address Grey Squirrel predation specifically the squirrels were described, by Dr Chris Stoate who led the study, as the number one suspect given their arboreal habits and fondness for eggs and chicks.

Experiments by a team from the University of Leeds & Princeton University have demonstrated that bats are able to sense the earth's magnetic field. Ten Big Brown Bats, a North American species, were subjected to artificial magnetic fields, which altered the direction of magnetic north that they might perceive by ninety degrees either west or east. The bats were then released about 20km north of their usual roost along with a control of five Big Brown Bats from the same roost, which hadn't been exposed to the artificial magnetic fields. The five bats in the control flew straight back south to their roost whereas the ten "magnetised" bats flew off either, east or west, the direction corresponding to the magnetic field that they had been exposed to and took a few days to find their way back to the roost. The ability to detect the Earth's magnetic field was only previously known in two other species of mammal, Naked Mole Rats and Siberian Hamsters. This research lends support to the idea that other types of mammal may be able to navigate using the Earth's magnetic field, though I suspect that my wife won't be one of them.

The group of Wild Boar that were released from a farm on Exmoor at the end of 2005 are proving to be very mobile; I seem to recall that the attempt by the local hunt to try and round them up was predicted to have that effect. The boar have now turned up in Dartmoor, some 50 miles away and are reported to have bred there. Their reception has been a little mixed with the press accusing them of menacing a dog walker and terrorising a Dachshund.

Meanwhile, closer to home, in a wood near the A19 in Hartlepool, George Howe found some cloven hoofprints, four inches long. He sent me some initial pictures, which weren't terribly clear. My initial suggestion that a Roe Deer had skidded in the mud was answered with a rebuttal and a second picture, which showed three indistinct, rounded prints about six inches apart. My second reply was that it was a black panther stalking a Roe Deer or a wind-up. Again a rebuttal, more pictures and a comment about the heel prints at the back. Four-inch cloven hooves with separate heel prints suddenly started to register and Jonathan Pounder was despatched with Plaster of Paris and a better camera. Jonathan sent me the picture later in the day, which showed a very clear imprint of a porcine trotter. We await confirmation as to the wildness of the print's maker but it was in the depths of a wild, wild wood less than a mile from where a Wild Boar farm closed down a couple of years back.

I was tempted to do a specifically Hartlepool article for this edition such was the number of Hartlepool related stories that have turned up. Alistair McLee reported that a birder friend of his, whilst sea watching at Hartlepool saw 2 large cetacean fins surface twice at great distance then vanish. His friend used to be a cetacean counter on the Biscay ferries Research Group, so was well used to cetaceans and distance. He thinks his brief sighting was of two sub-adult male Orcas.

Robert Smith, one of Hartlepool's countryside rangers, was taken aback by a much closer range view of Hartlepool's wildlife. Whilst stood outside the portacabin that "shelters" the local Partnership for Nature from the ravages of Seaton Common's weather he was surprised to be approached by a fox. The fox got closer and closer until eventually it came right up and took a bite of the pork pie in Robert's hand. The fox regularly comes up to Robert for a snack now and has even brought its vixen, although she is more circumspect. I believe Robert is discussing with the foxes a partnership approach to preventing rabbit damage to the hedge that Natural England have planted on the approach road.

There is a bit more evidence that Muntjac may be getting a toe-hold in the region. There have been two reports of Muntjac at Aisalby last November. Also George Howe told me that

a couple of local farmers who were watching the hunt go past saw a group of six (that's 6!) Muntjac at Embleton on the western boundary of Hartlepool about 4 or 5 years ago. Prior to this I only knew of four reports; Teeside Airport (aka Durham-Tees Valley-Just-Over-The-Border-From- North Yorkshire Airport, or whatever catchy, inclusive title it now goes by); Wingate; Great Burden in north-east Darlington and the road kill specimen near Thorpe Thewles. Thorpe Thewles and Wingate are at either end of the Castle Eden Walkway; with Embleton in the middle and lots of woodland in between it's probably a good spot to start looking.

Finally some good news and some bad news. The re-introduction programme for Harvest Mice run by Stockton Borough Council would seem to have succeeded in at least one instance. Around 50 captive bred Harvest Mice were released in Pickard's Meadow at the Wynyard Woodland Park in 2003. On October 18th 2006 one of the small mammal trapping sessions that are run at each of the release sites caught a single harvest mouse. I am not aware of any conclusive evidence that the releases have succeeded in the long term in any of the other three release sites though something is using the mouse boxes on sticks at Portrack Marsh and a Harvest Mouse nest has been found near to the release site on the Tees Road. Ironically the release at Pickard's Meadow was the only hard release and involved one of the lowest numbers of mice.



One small step for a Harvest Mouse (Photo: Ken Smith)

You will no doubt have heard for many years now the familiar lament that if we don't do something now, something will go extinct. Of course naturalists are aware that things are already going extinct quite rapidly but what the media mean by the second "something" is something big, warm-blooded and with a bit of media appeal. Well it has finally happened and we have lost the Baiji. The Baiji is a primitive, blind, river dolphin that swam in the Yangtze River for several million years but has finally succumbed to the many forms of

pollution that suffocate the world's busiest watercourse. Its likely demise has been known about for some years, in fact it features in Douglas Adams book, "Last chance to see" which was about a whistle-stop world tour to see species on the brink. In the case of the Baiji something was about to be done in that the Chinese government had set up a reserve in a lake to which they were going to transfer the Baiji to start a captive breeding programme. Unfortunately a six-week expedition to locate some Baiji using sonar equipment failed to find even one. Those involved commented that the odd animal might have escaped them but that, even so, the species is effectively extinct. Whilst the sad demise of the Baiji might be hoped to act as a wake up call, we all know deep down that we still won't do something, or at least not enough, the Baiji will just be the first and the only question will be which big, charismatic species will join it. I'm not looking forward to the BBC series.

Summer/ Autumn 2007

I think I may have discovered a new phenomenon! We have left several areas of grass in North Cemetery in Hartlepool uncut, primarily to allow the young trees we've planted the opportunity to grow unhindered but in fact it's had a much wider benefit than that. Quite a lot of wildflowers have arrived and not a few insects. What has also been noticeable since we planted the trees is the presence of owls in the cemetery after a gap of many years. Several people have commented on how good it was that planting the trees had brought back the owls. Now owls are pretty charismatic and very good PR, much more so than the Silver Y Moths and the froghoppers that seemed to me to be the main beneficiaries of the long grass, so far be it from me to point out the inconvenient ecological truth that tree planting doesn't equal owls without little, furry intermediaries. I was happy to let people think that we'd made the owls appear just by tree planting. The thing is North Cemetery had previously had the bowling green manicure for many years and added to that it is slap bang in the most built up area of the town. I really couldn't see word getting out to the Field Voles and Common Shrews in the wilder parts of Hartlepool that there was a bit of long grass going begging and them sneaking in, in the dead of night, to claim it. How little do I know! We strimmed the perimeter of one of these grass islands last week and several Field Voles scattered before us. This can only mean that voles are scattering around over large inhospitable distances or that some of them hung on for decades in the few square centimetres of long grass that didn't get strimmed around the graves. Further evidence of this phenomenon was provided by a visit to Dale Fort Field Studies Centre in Wales, which is sited on the very end of a rocky promontory. Right in the middle of the buildings complex there is an isolated strip of soil, about 12m*2m, left over by the builders in 2006 and now vegetated with long grass. The mound was lifting with Field Voles with burrows every foot or so; in fact it's so overcrowded that the voles can be easily seen running around between the burrows. These two vole success stories raise all sorts of questions about how far voles can disperse, how many individuals you need to found a new population and the minimum amount of habitat required to sustain a population but perhaps I'm thinking too ecologically. Maybe spontaneous generation is true after all and if you leave long grass you end up with voles (and owls).

If this wasn't confusing enough I now realise that I never understood foxhunting. You see I thought that the purpose of foxhunting was to keep down the number of foxes yet, according to an article in The Observer, the Masters of Fox Hounds Association is claiming that the number of foxes has fallen since the ban on hunting with hounds. Apparently thirty-six percent of hunts are reporting fewer foxes with only twenty percent reporting more. Their argument being, I suppose, that if we want lots of foxes we'd better hunt them.

Fox numbers could be hit further if calls for the re-introduction of lynx are heeded. A study published in the Journal of Zoology looked at lynx predation on foxes and the population trend of foxes following lynx re-establishment in Sweden. It found that lynx predation accounted for 50% of the mortality of foxes in the admittedly, small-scale, (4 of 8 individuals) radio-tracking study. On an annual basis lynx predation accounted for between 4 and 14% of the total fox population. Fox populations also decreased by around 10% annually during the study period. The study concluded that the population decrease could potentially be accounted for by lynx predation alone, although there were alternative explanations.

David Hetherington of Aberdeen University has studied the feasibility of re-introducing lynx to Britain. His study concluded that there was sufficient habitat to create the fourth largest lynx population in Europe with suitable areas for re-introduction being the Highlands and Southern Uplands of Scotland and Kielder in Northumberland. It was postulated that this could be achieved with a founder population of around 30 lynx. The government, obviously keen not to exacerbate the fox-reducing effects of its ban on hunting, is not showing any signs of endorsing such a re-introduction.

The otter would appear to be continuing to spread in the region. A report to Durham Wildlife Trust of a road casualty near Bishop Middleham was the first evidence that otters are now colonising the upper reaches of the Skerne (one had been previously seen on the lower reaches in Darlington town centre). In April this year I drove for several days past an elongated piece of chocolate brown fur on the A1M at Morden Carrs, about 100m north of where the Skerne goes under the motorway, before realising that I might be looking at the remains of a dead otter. The identification was subsequently confirmed by Colin Holme, who managed to get a photo of it.

Unfortunately Water Vole populations seem to be going the opposite way to those of the otter. I haven't seen one at Drinkfield Marsh in Darlington for several years now, though that perhaps not unexpected given the increase in water levels and cats on the site. Of much greater concern is that on the Skerne, with its miles of interconnected habitat, Clive Merrick hasn't seen one for at least a couple of years. Previous to that Clive could pretty much guarantee seeing or hearing one in the Rockwell stretch whenever he visited. Similarly a study of Water Voles in Hartlepool in 2006 by Emma Glister found no evidence of Water Voles at 4 of the 11 sites where they had been found in a previous survey in 2002. Even more worryingly the voles seem to have subsequently disappeared from their Hartlepool stronghold on Greatham Beck. Countryside warden, Robert Smith, regularly surveys this Beck and has seen no signs of the voles this year. Ominously a mink was seen on this stretch of Greatham Beck by Derek Clayton earlier in the year. Mink droppings have also been seen on Seaton Common, which is probably the only other decent sized Water Vole population in Hartlepool. It would seem that Water Voles are faring no better throughout the north east. A study commissioned by the Environment Agency in 2006 visited some 265 sites throughout the north east at or near to where Water Voles had been previously recorded. Of those only 39 still had Water Voles. In addition the survey looked at 100 new sites that had suitable water vole habitat; of those only five had Water Voles. There was a little good news in that large populations were found at sites in the upland areas of the East Allen near Alston and Langdon Beck on the Tees. I think we should press the government to relax the Hunting with Dogs legislation to allow the hunting of Water Voles with Jack Russell's; it may be their only hope!

Winter 2007

Bechstein's bat, which is one of Europe's rarest bats and possibly Britain's rarest mammal (a title it competes for with the Black Rat,) has been found in its most westerly location ever. Three Bechstein's were found roosting in a house in Newton Abbot in Devon on 3rd October. The finding was further unusual in that this is only the third time the species has been recorded in a building and they were roosting a short distance from a cluster of Long eared Bats. Bechstein's are usually confined to ancient woodland and their previous distribution was confined to a small area of south-east Wales and central, southern England. They are so rare that the first colony in Britain was only found in the late 1990s when a roost turned up in someone's airing cupboard!

Another exotic species might be taking the first steps to becoming established in Britain. There are reports of Sugar Gliders, a marsupial, on Wimbledon Common. Sugar Gliders have long grey fur and long pointed noses, so there is always the possibility of confusion with the Common's more famous inhabitants; I'll let you decide which is more likely to be the correct identification.

Meanwhile a long established exotic species might be well on the way to being a regular feature of north east mammal fauna. Kenny Crooks has seen a Muntjac twice within a week or so, in woodland between Nunthorpe and Guisborough. This happened in late August this year but he tells me that farmers have been reporting Muntjac in the Great Ayton/Stokesley area for the past year. Meanwhile, back in April, a colleague of mine, Derek Wardle, saw a live Muntjac by the side of the A1M at Washington Services. This is much further north than any of the other Muntjac sightings that NMG has recorded, the most northerly sightings prior to this being in the Sedgfield area. Even assuming that Muntjac are established in the Sedgfield area this is a long way for an individual deer to stray so perhaps they have colonised the intervening territory. Some tantalising evidence in support of this was offered by another of my colleagues who had taken her children to "Down on the Farm", an open farm near Houghton le Spring. The farm keeps red deer and told her that lots of little deer, which they claim were Muntjac, come out of the woods on a regular basis. It may well be that they are misidentifying Roe Deer but if anyone feels like following this up it should be worth a visit as they keep a number of other exotic mammals such as wallabies, chipmunks and raccoons, all potential future Houghton le Spring fauna.

There has been the following assortment of records from the south of the region:

- A road kill Otter was found near to the Sporting Lodge on Low Lane near Stainton on the outskirts of Middlesbrough, it is apparently one of last year's females and now with a taxidermist.
- Ian Lawson watched a water shrew at Wolviston Mill on the Billingham Beck, Grid Ref NZ430238.
- Neil Porrit saw a pine marten easting road kill somewhere in the North Yorks Moors area. We'll try and track down more details for the next edition.

The number of Whiskered bat records in Cleveland has almost doubled in the past couple of months. A bat training workshop in August caught one in a harp trap at Hutton near Guisborough, the first record for the borough of Redcar & Cleveland. Not to be outdone, Middlesbrough's first Whiskered Bat was found by Debbie Scott on the floor outside the Tees Forest offices in Stewart's Park.

There has been another hint that Leisler's Bats may be present in the north east. During a survey near Piercebridge, John Drewett recorded large and low flying bats with an echolocation call in the upper 20s kHz. Whilst these could be Noctules, the pitch of their calls seemed rather high. John hopes to obtain some time expansion recordings to give a better chance of confirming the identification.

After 10 years of doing bat work, which involves picking up several distressed bats each year I finally came face to face with my first Soprano Pipistrelle. The owner of the house where the bat was found told me that it had spent two days down their toilet before they put it in a box and phoned someone for help (I guess they got to the point where they just couldn't cross their legs any more!) Fortunately the bat made a full recovery and was released back over the west end of Darlington where it was found. This ratio of Common Pips: Soprano Pips rescued is pretty much in line with the results of last year's Bats & Roadside Mammals surveys of Durham which found a ratio of 208:11 Common:Soprano in terms of passes on the bat detector. Interestingly though this contrasts with the situation in North Yorkshire where John Drewett has found that Soprano roosts are quite common, especially along river valleys. Given that Soprano Pips are associated more with riparian habitats it is worth noting that the bat I picked up was found 500m from the River Tees and 400m from Northumbria Water's reservoirs.

Finally a conundrum to baffle mammalogist minds, assuming of course that it was a mammal. Alistair McLee reported this encounter while he was fishing along the Tees at Girsby, near Sockburn. From the other riverbank he heard a gentle purring noise, not unlike what a moggie might make though possibly a bit louder than typical as he heard it across the river. Following shortly after that and about 20 yards down the river he then heard a loud shrieking noise, similar to a chimpanzee. The shrieking noise was repeated several times over a couple of minutes. However there was no commotion as if one animal was killing another, he didn't even hear the animal or both animals if it was more than one, moving about. There was thick willow growth on the other side so he didn't see anything. Assuming that the shrieking was an animal and not the ghost of the legendary Sockburn Worm's last victim, my best guess was that the original purr was from a moggie and that the shrieking was from something totally unrelated (goodness knows what) that was reacting to the cat. Anybody able to offer a solution?

A study by researchers at Imperial College, London and published earlier this year modelled the effects that re-introducing wolves into the Scottish Highlands would have on the burgeoning red deer population. The study found that the wolf population would eventually reach an equilibrium point where it could maintain the red deer population at about 50% of its current level. This might even have an economic benefit because, although the wolves would take some trophy stags, estates wouldn't have the cost of culling hinds. In fact the study found that if culling of hinds was above 4-5% of the population per annum then the wolf population wouldn't be viable. This latter conclusion seems to contrast with a presentation that Martyn Gorman gave to the Mammal Society conference on a similar study in which he concluded that wolves could keep the red deer population in check but only if there was a severe cull of red deer in the first place. However it was a long time ago and I can't remember all the assumptions Professor Gorman made in his model and how long the model ran for. This latest study also surveyed the attitudes of various groups of people to the re-introduction of wolves. People living in urban areas were significantly in favour of it, whereas people in rural areas were only slightly in favour of it; farmers were slightly against it but farmer's representative groups were dead against it. The study didn't model the scenario of wolves preying on deer and sheep, partly because a one predator-

two prey scenario is much more complex to model than a one predator-one prey scenario and partly because the dynamics of sheep farming in the Highlands may undergo significant changes. Obviously sheep predation is a major issue that needs addressing but I think its worth bearing in mind that even if wolves do decide they prefer slow, defenceless mutton to rather fleeter venison the wolves will likely all be radio-collared and outnumbered 10 to 1 by researchers and that the experiment could probably be curtailed at any point. In any case the benefits of increased tourism would probably pay for compensation for most of the sheep in Scotland. In fact I wouldn't be surprised if providing wolf fodder wasn't a more economically viable form of sheep farming; take out some sheep and bring back people in the form of tourists,. It would be a bit like the Highland Clearances in reverse (that's me not getting the Policy Officer job with SNH then!)

You will recall that a proposal for re-introducing beavers to Knapdale in Argyllshire was thrown out by the previous Scottish Parliament environment minister. I wrote a facetious e-mail about this to Scottish Wildlife Trust asking how I might register my disapproval. The Trust cut out my e-mail and stuck it in the letters page of their magazine and I was somewhat surprised to find that I'd won a book for their star letter.

Since then fears of beaver re-introductions have featured in the news a couple of times. In Perthshire a family of beavers have been living in a loch for several months. There doesn't seem to be any indication of where they came from but they are being actively pursued in order to recapture them. A source quoted in the Scotsman said "The Scottish Executive are jumping up and down, saying you must trap them, even to the extent of digging them up." A spokeswoman for the Scottish Executive, who presumably had taken a break from jumping up and down at that point, was quoted as saying "These animals have escaped from some unknown location and, as such, represent an illegal introduction into the Scottish countryside."

At the same time, down in the Cotswolds, a colony of beavers that were introduced into the grounds of the Cotswolds Water Park in 2005 has been upsetting residents. One resident, "Concerned of Cotswolds" was quoted as saying; "Perhaps there was a good reason why the beaver population died out in the first place." (Not sure that I would class us killing them all as a "good" reason!) What was it about the beavers that so upset the residents? Apparently they cut down some trees. It was pointed out that the trees by the waterside needed thinning anyway so the beavers were actually doing a bit of good. Hopefully this placated the residents in this case but looking at the wider picture such attitudes do leave me unsure about the reaction of the public if we ever get round to re-introducing other species. Take bears for example; I am reliably informed that they crap in woods.



Not going down well in the Cotswolds, I expect (Photo: Ken Smith)

Meanwhile, as you will be aware, winds of change are blowing north of the border and I'm pleased to hear that the beaver re-introduction is riding on the breeze. The new environment minister, Michael Russell, has given his support to the re-introduction of the beaver. In fact he has said that he would like to see this happen as quickly as possible. Plans have now been drawn up with the intent of seeing beaver back in the wild in Scotland in early 2009. I do hope Mr Russell likes wolves!

Spring 2008

Last year continued in a similar vein to 2006, with some significant new mammal finds. The year concluded with a report of a new species of giant rat of the genus *Mallomys* in the cloud forests of New Guinea. Although hailed by the tabloids as five times the size of a sewer rat, it wasn't that unusual as there are several other species of very large cloud forest rats in New Guinea. Still good to know there is another species among their ranks. Somewhat more unusual was the reported discovery of a Giant Peccary in Brazil and a dwarf Manatee in the Amazon, the latter small enough to fit in a bath (now if only I could persuade my wife to use the shower instead). There was also the announcement of a dwarf type of Orca in the Antarctic.

The practice of splitting "known" species into two or more sibling species, perhaps most famously done in the case of the Soprano and Common Pipistrelle bats in Europe, has also thrown up some intriguing possibilities for new species. At the beginning of the year it was announced that the Clouded Leopard of Borneo and Sumatra was a separate species to its mainland relative. There are distinct differences in the coat colour of the two species and further evidence of their distinctiveness was provided by DNA analysis, in fact it was postulated that they might have diverged around one million years ago. More recently an examination

of the DNA of the various sub-species of giraffe has found at least six genealogically distinct sub-groups. The giraffe has been considered as a single species but it has now been suggested that there may be as many as eleven genetically distinct populations, each of which might merit specific status. Unfortunately some of these populations are critically endangered with just a few hundred individuals left.

More mundane but still guaranteed to gladden the heart of any Hartlepool ecologist, Robert Smith reports that Water Vole have recolonised Greatham Beck. This was their main stronghold in Hartlepool but they disappeared last year around the time Mink were spotted on the beck. Not only that, but there was a definite sighting of an Otter on the nearby Claxton Beck by Ian Forrest on 1st December. It would be nice to think that Otters had driven off the Mink, which allowed the Water Voles to recolonise; not necessarily great ecological science but excellent PR material.

Meanwhile, up on Tyneside, a hitherto unknown creature has emerged. Bank voles some 5" long have been seen by a couple of reputable naturalists in Gosforth Park. The voles, dubbed by some (me, mainly), as the Gosforth Were-Voles, live near the water and have very short tails. Apparently there are photographs of the creatures so they might not remain in the annals of cryptozoology for long.

There seems to have been a lot in the press about government proposals on culling Badgers. To my shame I haven't kept abreast of the arguments so have only got a vague idea of what has been going. Forgive me if I'm wrong but it seems to me that it has gone something like: farmers say badgers should be culled – government says cull badgers; Krebs says culling badgers won't work – government says don't cull badgers; chief scientist says we've got to do something, so cull badgers- government says cull badgers. However I think I recognise this game and if I'm not mistaken the next line of argument will be, "Simon says don't cull badgers." So that'll be alright then.

Australian scientists have come up with a novel way of potentially cutting greenhouse gases. As I'm sure you are aware, ruminants such as cows and sheep produce methane as a by-product of their digestion. Combine the potency of methane as a greenhouse gas with the fact that certain cultures like to eat burgers a lot; the result is an estimated 20-30% of the greenhouse gas effect. Kangaroos, on the other hand, digest their food without producing methane; in fact a by-product of their digestion is acetate, which actually aids digestion. The scientists have isolated the bacteria in the Kangaroo's guts that enable them to do this and are proposing introducing those bacteria into ruminants in some form of food supplement to try to re-programme them to digest their food more efficiently without producing methane. Now it strikes me that this is approaching the problem from the wrong end. Surely it would be simpler if we just ate Kangaroos or, perhaps not as easy but much more effective, couldn't we just re-programme Americans.

Plans by the multi-millionaire, Paul Lister to turn his 23,000 acre Alladale estate in Scotland into a kind of Mesolithic Park have taken a step further with the importation of a pair of young European Elk from Sweden. The Elk are to be released into a 450 acre pen where their interactions with resident Red Deer, Roe Deer and Wild Boar will be monitored. In the longer term Mr Lister plans to re-introduce all of the big species now missing from the British fauna including predators such as Lynx, Bear and Wolves. Although his estate is huge it isn't big enough to sustain a couple of packs of Wolves so he is hoping to recruit local farmers to work in partnership in creating a bigger reserve which will be surrounded by the biggest electric fence in Britain. The article on the BBC website concludes by saying,

“Although a Dangerous Wild Animals licence is needed for the Wolves, one of the biggest obstacles is likely to be winning over his critics, including the Ramblers’ Association, who would have to agree to a change in their access rights to the land”. If it’s a choice between ramblers or Wolves I wonder which one the farmers would rather have.

Extinct British megafauna made a brief return to County Durham in December when David Cooper found a Wild Boar dead by the side of the road near Hardwick Hall in Sedgefield. I ran Colin Holm, the Countryside Officer from Sedgefield, to see if he knew anything about it. He hadn’t heard anything but he did say that there were farms in Sedgefield district that had exotic species such as Elk and Bison; I can’t wait for the power cuts!

Summer 2008

Happy Anniversary Patti!

An anniversary that might have escaped you in 2007 was that it was 40 years since the famous footage of an alleged Bigfoot was taken by Roger Patterson and Bob Gimlin at Bluff Creek, California. Widely denounced as a hoax, the film clip has been subjected to minute scrutiny and more recently digital enhancement and yet, so far, no one has found the zip. In fact an attempt by Chris Packham on BBC X-Creatures to debunk the story possibly ended up giving it more credibility. The Bigfoot in question, undoubtedly female as it had pendulous breasts, was nicknamed Patti and in honour of her (or him, assuming it was a man in a monkey suit) I’m devoting this edition to all things primate. (Also, I needed an excuse to compile the salacious monkey stories that Alistair McLee sent me)

While sightings of Bigfoot are ten a penny, it is less well known that China has its own “Wildmen”. In the Shennongjia region in the province of Hubei there have been over 100 sightings of an upright bigfoot like creature, albeit a little smaller than the American version, in the 1.5-2m height range. In the most recent sighting the witnesses were approaching a sharp curve in the road when they saw two “wildmen” covered in black hair, about 50m from their car. The larger of the wildmen was 1.7m high and the smaller one 1.4m. What made the sighting more interesting was that two different sized footprints were found at the site. Professionals followed the sighting up two days later from the China Association for Scientific Expedition. One of its members Zhang Jinxing, described as Head of Comprehensive Expedition Team of Bizarre Animals, (either something was lost in translation or someone is making that up) is on record as saying that they have found some 2,000 footprints to date plus some hair that they haven’t been able to attribute to other animals.

If you think stories of unknown primates are bizarre they are nothing compared to some of the things attributed to their known relatives. In Delhi the deputy mayor was killed by monkeys when he fell off the roof of his house whilst trying to fend off a band of Macaques. Rhesus Macaques have become a major problem in Dehli but culling them is an unacceptable option to devout Hindus. Various methods have been tried without success to remove them including, it is reported, training the larger Langur monkeys to chase away the smaller Macaques (can’t think why that didn’t work). A more recent plan by the state’s government to get unemployed youths to sterilise the monkeys has been condemned by conservationists as cruel and counterproductive. I think it would be equally cruel to India’s unemployed youth, imagine trying to castrate aggressive male Macaques (or perhaps don’t). As job creation schemes go it makes Norman Tebbit look like a Liberal Democrat.

If you think they have it bad in Dehli spare a thought for the women of the village of Nachu in Kenya. Here large groups of monkeys invade the farms and eat the crops, to the extent that the village now has to receive famine food relief. The monkeys seem to be more afraid of men so the women, whose job it is to tend the crops, have apparently tried wearing their husbands clothes to fool the monkeys. Unfortunately the monkeys don't seem to be fooled. According to one of the women villagers quoted in the BBC report: "The monkeys can tell the difference and they don't run away from us and point at our breasts. They just ignore us and continue to steal the crops." Not content with that the monkeys make rude gestures at the women. "The monkeys grab their breasts, and gesture at us while pointing at their private parts. We are afraid that they will sexually harass us," the witness continued.

It may be that the Kenyan monkeys had read a recent article in the journal Nature, describing the results of a study led by David Reich of Harvard Medical School. The study looked at the differences in DNA sequences between chimps and humans and used that to estimate when the two species split. By their calculations the species may have split between 5.4 and 6.3 million years ago rather than the 7 million years estimated by previous studies. Not only that different parts of the genome differed by different amounts, with the X chromosomes being the most similar. This suggested to the researchers that the two groups (species) continued to hybridise perhaps for up to a million years after they had otherwise diverged.

It is well known that we are more closely related to chimps than say, chimps are to gorillas or other apes. Indeed Jared Diamond, in his book of the same name, describes us as the third chimpanzee. If we are the third chimp then the second species is, of course, the Bonobo, formerly known as the Pygmy Chimp and only distinguished from the Common Chimp about 70 years ago. While the physical differences between Bonobos and Chimps are subtle, their behavioural differences couldn't be more marked. Chimps are the familiar male-dominated, highly tribal, species, with a tendency to resolve things with aggression and violence; in Bonobo society females rule the roost, inter-group relations are fairly peaceful and, most noticeably, disagreements are resolved by a bout of group sex. I don't think I need to point out which one we most closely resemble. I can't help but think that the world would be a much better place if we'd taken after Bonobos, if nothing else it would certainly make Prime Minister's question time a lot more interesting.

Autumn 2008

I don't know if the Guinness Book of Records has picked it up yet but it's possible that a new world record has been set for hand washing. Earlier this year Defra announced its policy and action plan for managing Wild Boar in Britain. Now unlike most world records it wasn't the speed in which it was done, in fact Defra ran its Wild Boar consultation some two years ago and have been nagged by various bodies to produce their conclusions ever since; instead it was the thoroughness of the operation that took the breath away. For those of us who have waited with baited breath to see whether they would recommend zoning, culling some of them, culling all of them or encouraging their continued existence; Defra's new policy on Wild Boar is... (pause for imagined drum roll...) allow landowner's to decide the future of Wild Boar on their landholdings. So I guess if you do want to see Wild Boar back in Britain then all you have to do is buy up a decent sized chunk of Kent.

In the Forest of Dean, the Forestry Commission have already decided to institute a cull. The cull is based on safety concerns as there have been a few instances of people or dogs being

threatened or attacked and the odd boar has turned up in gardens and in one case in a Primary School. The numbers of Wild Boar in the Forest of Dean are relatively small, either 50 or 100 depending on which source you read, but have the potential to rise rapidly. The cull will only be partial and will concentrate on taking out young animals.

Meanwhile Wild Boar continue to pop up in unexpected places. Kevin O'Hara tells me that one of his ex-students has sent him a grainy photo from their mobile phone of a boar that was killed on the road between Hexham and Corbridge.

Another exterminated species that is heading back to our shores is the Beaver. The Scottish Environment Minister, Michael Russell, has now issued the licence for the trial reintroduction of up to four families of Beaver in Knapdale in Argyllshire. Not only that but it seems like every conservationist across the country (I could be exaggerating slightly at this point) is talking about beaver reintroduction for their stretch of river. The bandwagon is rolling; I wonder where it will stop.

An introduction that definitely wasn't licensed has occurred in Ireland. The introduced species only came to light during an analysis of owl & kestrel pellets when skulls of the Greater White-toothed Shrew, *Crocidura russula*, were found. The Greater White-toothed Shrew is a European species that is only found in Britain on certain of the Channel Islands, although the related Lesser White-toothed Shrew is found on the Scilly Isles. It is not known how long the shrews have been there or how they got there but they definitely seem to be well established as they have now been found in 15 locations in Tipperary and Limerick. In one sample 53 skulls were found in 10 pellets indicating that they are becoming an important food source for barn owls where they are found. It has been suggested that the shrews, which are apparently often associated with human habitation, were accidentally imported with horticultural products. If this is the case, and I struggle to imagine the alternative of someone deliberately smuggling in shrews, then surely it would have only involved a very small number of animals. Perhaps their successful establishment from such a small founder stock could be due to lack of competition, the only other shrew in Ireland being the Pygmy Shrew. It does make me wonder, if the shrews can colonise Ireland from a few individuals that stowed away in some bulbs from Holland, or similar, where else might they have got to? I shall have to sharpen my tweezers and soak a few more owl pellets.

Another exotic species that definitely didn't get here in plant pots is the Coati. Coatis are long-nosed, raccoon relatives found in Central and South America or just about any animal collection you could care to mention. There are a few of them living wild in the Lake District as attested by a photo in a recent edition of BBC Wildlife Magazine. They have actually been known about for several years and a Parks spokesperson told BBC Wildlife that they considered them a bit of a novelty (like grey squirrels then?). Recent changes to the Dangerous Wild Animals Act mean that a licence is no longer required to keep Coatis so they may be escaping more regularly in future.

As if these weren't enough to make the hot off the press, "Mammals of the British Isles Handbook" out of date it appears that a Prevost's Squirrel has been hanging around gardens in Leeds. Prevost's Squirrels are extremely attractive; indeed their latin name means beautiful Squirrel or perhaps extremely attractive squirrel. They have a shiny black dorsal surface and an orangey belly separated by a thin white line (think arboreal Great Crested Newt, only shinier)

For those of you who like your squirrels in different colours, it seems that Cambridgeshire is the place to be. The (I nearly said native) grey colour form of Grey Squirrel is being ousted by a black colour form of Grey Squirrel. In some places the majority of the Grey Squirrel population is black. Some have suggested that the black squirrels are more aggressive than the grey ones but I suspect that will turn out to be as false as the theory that grey squirrels drove out the reds because they were more aggressive. The black coat is a mutation of the melanocortin receptor gene but this allele is dominant which would explain the spread of the colour through the population. However to be a nice shiny black colour squirrels need to have two copies of the gene, heterozygous squirrels are a black-brown colour. It is thought that the black squirrels spread from Hertfordshire where black squirrels have been known for some time but that doesn't explain their recent, rapid expansion so perhaps there are two types of allele for black colour in squirrels, one dominant and one recessive, as is the case in certain domesticated animals. So far black squirrels have only spread as far north and west as Cambridge but who knows, if this continues we may have them in Northumberland in fifty years.

I'm never sure how I feel about public surveys; I'm a great believer in getting as many people involved as possible but I'm not sure how confident I am of the result; after all they always seem to evict the wrong person in "Big Brother." This lack of confidence in the result has been recognised to the extent whereby a survey question about whether the area of a piece of habitat is the size of a car or the size of a tennis court is now considered too difficult for the general public (you know who you are ☺). An ambitious bucking of this trend has recently been launched by Scottish Natural Heritage who wants the public to report sightings of genuine Scottish Wildcats. As I'm sure you know Scottish Wildcats face extinction due to interbreeding with feral cats and it is incredibly difficult to tell apart a genuine Wildcat from a crossbreed. In fact a prosecution of a gamekeeper accused of killing Wildcats failed because no expert could be one hundred per cent sure of telling a pure bred Wildcat from a crossbreed. The on-line survey has helpful drop down menus where you can select various characteristics, for example the coat colour options range from black and white, and through tortoiseshell to tabby (I kid you not!) Fortunately last year a genetic marker was identified that can distinguish between pure Wildcats and those with some feral genes. So all the public needs then is a mobile lab and the audacity to pluck a bit of fur from the Wildcat without getting it tainted with the DNA from their own blood. Now those are the sorts of people I want voting on "Big Brother!"



"Touch not the cat, except a glove", or "Na bean don chat gun lamhainn," as the Macpherson clan might say. (Photo: Ken Smith)

My contribution to Jonathan Pounder's mammal map of Cleveland has largely been confined to the distribution of bits of fur left on roads. In all I must have recorded over 500 such bits and there's always a tinge of sadness that something has had to die for me to record its having been there. This week I came across my saddest bit of fur yet. On North Road, the main road that runs through the centre of Darlington, two feet into the road on a pedestrian crossing, is a squashed hedgehog. While some have postulated that they may be evolving to run away from cars rather than roll up into a ball it's clear that they still haven't evolved enough to wait for the green man.

Winter 2008

This has proved to be a mammoth edition (actually proboscideans are about the only mammalian order that doesn't feature; sorry to disappoint), so much so that I've had to break it down with a bit of taxonomy.

Deer

Following on from my article on Muntjac distribution in the north east in the last edition of the newsletter, I have received several further reports of the species. In the article I commented that there hadn't been any reports from the Wynyard Woodland Park even though it was close the Sedgefield/Wynyard sightings "hotspot" but that has now changed with two reports, both this year; a probable sighting by Graeme Oddie in Thorpe Wood and a definite sighting (close enough to see the canines) by Wayne Horsley just south of Tilery Wood. A little further north, Dave Jackson saw one in the bit of Hartlepool's countryside that lies west of the A19 in July.

South of the river Tees there has been a report by a New Marske resident, Phil Graham, of a single Muntjac in Errington Woods in May 2008 and another, by a neighbour of Alistair McLee, just south of Kirklevington in July 2008.

Way out west on the Waskerley Way (I found I could only say that twice without sounding like Bugs Bunny) a woman came across a Muntjac carcass in 2007. She retrieved the skull, which was identified by Mike Mann but unfortunately her Alsation ate it!

According to Mike Mann's brother-in-law, Muntjac might have been present in the north east for quite some time. In 1976 he was working for an open-cast company, cutting down woodland when he saw a Muntjac at Stand-Alone Wood near Esh Winning.

Going up the deer scale a couple of notches, Alistair Nash who is the Woodland Trust's deer expert has reported that there have been three reliable, independent sightings of Fallow in a wood south of Durham, by woodland officers. In the same woodland Alistair found a couple of areas of large prints that were definitely fallow (big enough to get 4 fingertips into with ease – ie approx 6+ cm)

Mustelids

Otters aren't perhaps the rarity that they were but I still think they merit a line or two. That's certainly the case for the one that was seen on the River Skerne in the town centre of Darlington in August. The sighting was by the same people who saw an otter in the same spot a couple of years ago although given that they live in a flat overlooking the river perhaps that's not so surprising. Otters also seem to pop up for Don Griss on a regular basis in the High Conniscliffe area of the Tees.

Pine Martens in the north east are much more of an enigma and that reputation has only been enhanced by a series of encounters of the possible kind. The first of these is by Steve Lyas from that distant world that was 1975. *“While walking toward Hutton village in the (Guisborough) Forest with my brother and dog, there was suddenly a commotion in the undergrowth and a rabbit came out followed by “something?”. This then stopped, looked at us for a couple of seconds then turned and headed back into the bushes. It was about 15 feet away and up a bank side so was looking down on us. My brother and I discussed what we saw, dismissed Weasel, Stoat, Polecat and Ferret. Believe it or not (and I have never disclosed this to anyone since) all we came up with at the time was either a Tasmanian devil or a wolverine, (Not things seen in the wild of the UK but we were young and were not going to admit we did not have a clue what it was) we did not mention this to anyone. A couple of years later we were watching a documentary on the TV about Scottish wildlife and a pine martin came on. My brother and I both looked at each other and said that was what we had seen those years earlier. Again not a confirmed sighting and it was a long time ago. But if I were a gambling man, my money would be on a Pine Martin. I think the Tazzy Devil and Wolverine would be very good odds, but not worth a bet.”*

More recently Keith Ryan told me that his partner, Jan, was sure that she saw a Pine Marten on the road at Thorpe Larches in 2003 or 2004. Although she'd never seen one before after looking at photos she was convinced that's what it had been. Shortly afterwards a friend of Keith's, Jim France, said he'd seen one in the same area at roughly the same time on a fence post. Not only that, but a Pine Marten had apparently been photographed at the Sedgefield golf course around that time. Now my first (and to be honest, second and third) reaction was that these would have been stoats. The woodland at Thorpe Larches backs on to what was the extensive Wynyard estate and I'd once quizzed the old gamekeeper there, Frank Mitchinson, about what wildlife had been present during his many years of “managing” the wildlife. Frank could recall both Harvest Mouse and Red Squirrel being common enough in the 60s to not be worth remarking on and even a lone Red Deer stag turning up but never any record of either dormouse or pine marten. My final verdict was about to fall on stoat when by chance I had to take a short cut down the A177 the night after debating this with Keith. By an astonishing co-incidence, as I never normally travel that road these days, I caught a glance of a dead animal by the side of the road that was the right size and colour for a pine marten. This was about 1/2 a mile up from Thorpe Larches. My mammal ID at 50mph in the dark when thinking about where I should have been 15 minutes earlier isn't too good and it was two days before I could get back. By then it was just a bit of squashed, dark chestnut fur and even though I'd taken a plastic bag and some gloves with me to try and recover it, it was just before some bad bends with no verge and I would have probably been a bit of squashed mammal myself if I'd tried. If it had been earlier in the year I might have put it down to fox cub but this year's foxes would be almost fully grown now. I've never seen a cat or ferret this colour and it looked too dark for a stoat and a little too large. I reluctantly had to let this particular carcass go but the mystery deepens.

Even more mysterious (unlikely?) was a report, via Durham Wildlife Trust, of a Pine Marten at the golf course at Burdon, South Tyneside, although apparently the observer gave a good description. Perhaps someone is going round releasing pine martens on golf courses!

In a Pine Marten project in a bit more promising territory, Northumberland Wildlife Trust have linked up with VWT to assist in their scat/DNA surveys, with which they are also hoping to monitor several more areas across the north west of the county where they get regular reports. The areas covered so far are Wark forests and Harbottle and Kidland forests. Basically volunteers walk a set circular route around the woodland tracks collecting and

photographing likely Pine Marten scats. They (the scats) are sent to Waterford in Ireland for DNA analysis.

I am thinking about instituting an award each edition for the bravest act in the cause of providing mammal records. For this edition Steve Lyas has swept the board, taking first, second and third prizes. His admission that he thought he'd seen a Tasmanian Devil took some bottle but was only good enough for third. For second prize he juggled with some weasels in the following lively account: *"Good encounter with a family of weasels on the A173 just outside Great Ayton on the road to Stokesley . Following a Gas board van, which suddenly came to stop and the driver got out and flagged down the traffic coming the other way. In the road were 3 young weasels. The gas man tried to usher them to the side of the road where he said the mother ran. The youngsters were having none of it though. All 3 were squealing and one was attacking the gas man's boots. I went to assist and picked the 2 slightly less aggressive ones up and moved them to the hedge row still squealing and trying their hardest to kill me. The third was placed in safety alongside its siblings by the gas man. A round of applause from the car drivers nearest the incident followed. I would never have guessed that such a small bundle could show such aggression."* First prize though was for doing something that all us male mammalogists have wanted to do but never dared; turning the car round to look at road kill with the wife in the passenger seat. *"Had a bit of excitement at the weekend with what looked like a dead Pine Martin at the side of the road just outside Guisborough on the A171 toward Middlesbrough. Turned the car round and went home for the camera much to the annoyance of my wife and disgust of the kids, to come back and identify a dead Ferret. It was very dark brown with a small cream spot under the chin, but definitely a Ferret! Back off to Teesside Park it was then."*

Bats

My standard comment with bats is that they keep on surprising me, but I don't think I've heard anything quite as surprising as a sighting by Ian Forrest at Billingham Beck Country Park. In the middle of the day Ian watched a bat flying up and downstream over a 10yds stretch in a more or less vertical ellipse, between 2 and 12 feet above the stream, returning over the same area again and again. It repeated the same pattern at least half a dozen times before heading up into the tree canopy and out of view but could have been doing it for far longer as he came across it as he crossed a footbridge. As if this wasn't remarkable enough, the bat was carrying a large object, almost as large as itself. Completing the triumvirate of weirdness, a kingfisher flying upstream had to dive under the water to avoid the bat as it continued its circling. The kingfisher then came back downstream and again had to dive out of the way and then finally flew back upstream this time giving the bat a wider berth. Ian wasn't sure whether the bat was mobbing the kingfisher or their near mid-air collisions were just co-incidental. He managed to get a blurry photo of the bat complete with "luggage". From his description of the bat as appearing larger than the kingfisher and the colour of the bat on the photo, it seems as if the bat can only have been a Noctule. This is the first record of Noctule for Billingham Beck and as if just to complete the litany of abnormal bat behaviour, Noctules are the swifts of the bat world flying high and fast and aren't noted for tight circles and flying among foliage. The bulg, by the way, was possibly a baby bat as mother bats will sometimes transport their young between roosts however this was almost as big as the adult bat and at this time of year young bats are usually flying for themselves. Perhaps there just isn't a rational explanation for this one!

There has also been a collective noun (a whisper, perhaps?) of new Long-eared bat records on Teesside. Firstly Jonathan Pounder and Dave Thew were called out to pick up one that had turned up in a large fabrication shed on Hartlepool Docks; not exactly prime Long Eared

territory. Another Long-eared turned up on the doorstep of the Hassel's in Kirklevington, not an unexpected area perhaps but still only my third record for the borough of Stockton. Finally Colin Heppenstall sent me some photos of a Long-eared Bat that had turned up in the Darchem factory in Stillington (thus making my fourth record for Stockton). This is the factory where Cleveland's third ever, Whiskered Bat turned up five years ago. (I shall have to check whether Darchem now qualifies for Local Wildlife Site status under the new Cleveland criteria).

Friday 13th September was a red letter day for rare bats according to the UK Bats forum. A Parti-coloured Bat flew in off the sea at north Norfolk and went to roost in a pill box on the beach. On the same day a male Kuhl's pipistrelle was picked up on the Isle of Wight. Kuhl's Pipistrelle has been officially recorded in Britain on little more than a handful of occasions, all in the past 20 years, but its distribution is spreading northwards and a maternity colony has been found in Jersey. Parti-coloured bat is a northern European species that is known to be migratory and one or two bats are now recorded in Britain on an almost annual basis. I think it's a safe bet that one of them will eventually become recognised as our 18th resident bat species but I wouldn't like to call it as to which one. However there was a further comment on the bat forum that suggests that Kuhl's might have been here all along. In Brian Vesey-Fitzgerald's 1949, "British Bats" it states "In Hampshire examples with a distinct white border to the wing membrane occur, and seem to stick together in their own colonies." A white border on the wing membrane is a diagnostic feature of Kuhl's Pipistrelle.

Water Voles

A group has been set up over the past year to deliver a regional strategy for the water voles (from Tweed to Tees). This is in draft form now but will allow conservation policies to be finalised at a local level and foresee every opportunity to save the species from extinction. At present the species has two fairly distinct enclaves: one in the west, which is largely upland in nature and one broader more widespread enclave in the east, roughly east of the A1 (although there are some in between). One area being looked at is, is there any genetic difference between the two areas. It is hoped that it will be possible to find this out soon through DNA analysis of their droppings. Other issues under serious consideration are re-introduction, particularly for Northumberland and where best to do mink control.

Harvest Mice

There has been some encouraging news on Harvest Mice in the Tees Valley lately. Ruth Jackson of Natural England told me that a farmer in Boulby has found Harvest Mice on land that is under Environmental Stewardship. Hopefully there might be some scope for tweaking the stewardship prescription to benefit the mice. There is a record from a farm at Boulby from the 1990s and also records at Cowbar and Staithes so a bit of digging around in the long grass might be a fruitful way to pass an afternoon down that way.

Even more satisfying for me is news that the Harvest Mouse re-introduction programme that I led for Stockton Borough Council would appear to have succeeded at the main site, Cowpen Bewley Woodland Park. This after five years of thinking that it had failed when no signs of mice were found beyond the first six months after the release. In June this year, Ian Forrest was watching Reed Warblers, trying for a few photos, when he saw that a small mouse with long tail was feeding in the tops of grasses and using its tail to cling to the stems. Then in July Ian found a dead harvest mouse in roughly the same area. More recently another dead harvest mouse was found in one of the meadows a little distance from Ian's sightings. As this is now possibly the first successful re-introduction project in the north east I am thinking that some publicity might be in order. How do you think a Harvest Mouse on the side of a Stockton bus would look?

Spring 2009

Muntjac are again making the news in the mammal world. The Sumatran Muntjac (*Muntiacus montanus*) has been rediscovered, 78 years after it was last seen. Three animals have now been photographed in different parts of the Kerinci-Seblat National Park in the highlands of Sumatra.

In the greater Mekong region, two of the 15 new species of mammal that have been discovered there in the past decade are Muntjac. One, the Annamite Muntjac (*Muntiacus truongsoneensis*) from Vietnam, is still only known to western science from its skulls though it is known to the local people who apparently call it *samsoi cacoong* - "the deer that lives in the deep, thick forest".

Of course in Northumberland we have, according to certain Northumberland Wildlife Trust staff, our own version of Muntjac (*Muntiacus chameleopardis*) "the Muntjac who fools people into thinking it's a panther." But while the Tynedale Panther still remains the stuff of local legends, at least there are definitely Muntjac thereabouts. The first 100% definite muntjac north of the Tyne was shot in the Hexham area in mid- October 2008. It was pictured in the Hexham Courant looking exactly like a dead Muntjac. I suppose they must lose their shape-shifting powers after death.

The Tynedale Panther isn't the only north east mammal to straddle the boundary between myth and reality. For years I have heard of rumours of Mountain Hares in the Cheviots. Now Ian Douglas informs me that they were definitely there in the 1980s. As always I would be pleased to hear if anyone is able to provide more information.

Following the discovery of a new species for Ireland, Greater White toothed Shrew, from its remains in owl pellets (see NMG Winter 2008), it was with eager anticipation that I got stuck into a batch of barn owl pellets collected by Derek Clayton from Page Bank near Spennymoor, (you will note that I am homozygous for optimism). Lo and behold, the first skull that I pulled out was a large, slightly odd-shaped shrew skull. The skull quickly proved to be from a water shrew but I wasn't too disappointed as it was my first water shrew skull from an owl pellet. It was also the first water shrew record from that 10km square and, according to Lucy Campbell at Durham Biodiversity Partnership, the first from anywhere near there. Without checking the full database of water shrew records for Durham perhaps the closest recent record to this would be from the Browney Valley where Gary Bell found a dead water shrew in 2005. Given the paucity of our knowledge on small mammal distribution, it is worth noting that the total no of remains from the seven pellets that I checked was 15 Field Voles, 3 Pygmy Shrews, 2 Wood Mice, 1 Common Shrew, 1 Water Shrew; it might even be that one of the other species is also a new 10km square record.

There are a few contenders for the most rarely recorded mammal in the north east but it is likely that the title is currently held by the Yellow necked Mouse. Bob Wilkin tells me that there is a record of the species from Bardon Mill from the 1920s. I don't know if this is the only record and, of course, have no idea whether they are still there. Is anyone able to add any further information to this or, perhaps, get hold of some Tawny Owl pellets from Bardon Mill?

As reported in the last edition (NMG Winter 2008), Harvest Mice had been found at the introduction site of Cowpen Bewley Woodland Park, the first records since they were introduced in 2002. Stockton Borough Council countryside staff have now caught a Harvest

Mouse in the reedbed on Teesmouth that was the site of their fourth introduction attempt. The mouse, a male in prime condition, was caught in a Longworth trap on 14th Oct 2008. Although just one mouse was caught it does mean that a population has established following an introduction in 2005. It now seems that Harvest Mice have become established in at least three out of the four sites where they have been introduced. However the small number of records in spite of continuing survey effort means that their populations might still be quite small and precarious.

There is further evidence that Harvest Mice might be reasonably widespread south of the Tees. Derek Capes has been picking up their remains in a series of owl pellets. The samples were taken from owl nest boxes between Nunthorpe and Newton under Roseberry. One of the boxes was only erected in May 2008, so the pellets are relatively recent. Also, just outside of Cleveland, Bill Burn caught a Harvest Mouse in a mousetrap at Seamer. The identity of the latter was confirmed by Dave Braithwaite on the basis of its distinctive combination of small ears and long tail.

For those of you who would like to know more, I am just completing an article on Harvest Mice in the north east. The article attempts to summarise all that has been recorded about Harvest Mice in the north east and to make a more formal record of the snippets of new information that appear in this column. The article has been accepted for publication in the Transactions of the Natural History Society of Northumberland for publication sometime in 2009.

If the above has enthused you to search for strange mice, then Stockton is definitely the place to be at the moment. While trapping for Harvest Mice at Cowpen Bewley, Pam Stewart reported that they were managing to get 2 or 3 Wood Mice in a single Longworth trap. Not only do the Wood Mice forage in packs down there but some of the mice were jet black in colour. I've inserted one of Pam's photos, which shows a normal coloured Wood Mouse and a black Wood Mouse, both caught in the same trap.



Not to be outdone, her colleague Andrea Metcalfe claims to have some mice that are hybrids between Wood Mice and domestic House Mice. Her reasoning for this is that a female Wood Mouse kept sneaking into the pet mouse's cage to steal food until one day she was so fat she couldn't get out. She then gave birth to three young that have grown up into three different coloured mice and are now living happily ever after with Andrea. My thoughts are that I'm still expecting the story to end with a handsome prince (I dare say

Andrea is as well) especially as I can find no record of this happening before. In fact as a measure of how unlikely it is, in 2007 the University of Chicago Medical School announced as groundbreaking some research that they had done whereby they had injected embryonic stem cells from a Wood Mouse into the embryo of a House Mouse to create a chimera, an animal with cells from both parents. Although not quite the same thing as hybridisation it was groundbreaking in that the species' DNA diverge by 18% (ie 10 times that between humans and chimps) and the species' separated down their respective evolutionary paths an estimated 20 million years ago. I have urged Andrea to have the animals DNA tested as if she's correct she could be very rich and famous and have her choice of handsome princes (and I could write a children's classic based on it).

In another update to an item in the last edition, the Environment Agency has made a start on DNA analysis of Water Vole populations in the north east. As you may know the Water Voles in Scotland are distinct from those in much of England, with the Scottish ones being more closely related to those in Spain. I was fascinated to learn then that the Water Voles in Easington are Scots. That being the case I would be very surprised if the ones in Hartlepool (or, for that matter, anywhere up the east coast of Durham) weren't also of Scottish descent and I'm looking forward to scouring the becks of Hartlepool for some of their little, brown "liquorice torpedoes" for the EA to test.

An otter has been recorded for the first time from the Farne Islands. Although the animal itself hasn't been seen its tracks were found along a 60m stretch of muddy path on the island of Brownsman in November 2008. This is some 3 miles from the Northumberland coast so quite a feat, even for an otter.

Hopes have been raised recently for the future of red squirrels in Britain with the discovery that some individuals can develop immunity to the squirrel pox virus. A study by the Institute of Zoology at the Zoological Society of London examined a large sample of squirrels to see how far the virus was spreading. It found eight Red squirrels that had developed antibodies to squirrel pox, which meant that they had either developed the disease but not succumbed to it or been exposed to the disease but not developed it. Previously it had been thought the disease was invariably fatal to red squirrels. Research will now be focussed to see how widespread this immunity is within the red squirrel population. This discovery means that there is a good chance that a vaccine could be developed to inoculate red squirrels against squirrel pox but such a vaccine would take several years to develop.

One other small bit of good news for red squirrels in the north east was passed to me by Mark Wilkinson of the Save Our Squirrels project. A forest ranger had reported a red at Hamsterley Forest in 2007. This is several years after they had gone missing from there, presumed extinct.

Did you get what you wanted for Christmas? How about the gift of a slice of immortality? I realise that was a somewhat ironic statement given what the original was supposed to be about however in a more secular, commercial world you can be remembered forever by paying lots of money to have a bat named after you. Several bat species have been discovered by John Bickham, a professor at Purdue University, and the University is auctioning the right to name them. One of the bat species is a little Yellow Bat of the genus *Rhogeessa* and is one of the smallest bats in the Americas, weighing only 3 grams, ie half the size of a pipistrelle. I'm going to pass on this opportunity; there are already several species with the suffix "*bondii*" (and who in 50,000 years will know that one of them wasn't named after me!). Also immortality doesn't come cheap, previous auctions for the right to name

species have raised £50-500k per species. The good news is that much of this has been ploughed back into the conservation of the species in question.

I'm just tidying up my mammal records for 2008 before sending them off to the various recorders and like most years about 75% of my records are of road kill. Perhaps the most tantalising road kill that I have come across was on the A42 in Leicestershire back in 1982; unlikely as it seemed at the time I could have sworn that it was a wallaby. Anyway it turns out that stray wallabies aren't as outlandish a prospect as you might think. The Bird forum website had a picture of a wallaby killed on the road near Reading. This prompted several reports of wallabies wandering around the countryside, particularly around Henley-on-Thames & south Chilterns and I just had to quote one particular report from Henley in 2002: *"A woman called the police after finding a broken basement window which was covered with blood, Police took blood samples from the broken window and DNA tested them, they found that the test showed they were dealing with a marsupial and not a thief. It seems that the Wallaby fell through the basement window before managing to get out, it was never found."*

Finally I do fear that cryptozoologists are forever doomed to be disappointed. Earlier this year much hope was held out for some hairs thought possibly to have come from India's little-known version of the Yeti, the Mande Barung, or forest man. The hairs were found in an area of dense jungle in the East Garo hills of Meghalaya, where a forest worker had allegedly seen a Mande Barung for three consecutive days in 2003. The hairs were tested by experts at Oxford Brookes University and did not resemble hairs from any of the "usual suspects" such as other primates or Serows, a type of wild goat whose pelt has been used to manufacture ceremonial "yeti" scalps in Himalayan monasteries. The hairs were then sent off to the United States for DNA analysis but were identified as being from a Goral, a type of goat related to the Serow. This was described as a minor cryptozoological success in that it extended the range of the Goral much further into the lowlands than had previously been realised but I can't help feeling that it's just not the same.

Summer 2009

Re-introductions (my favourite topic ☺) is again in the news following the publication of a report by Natural England and People's Trust for Endangered Species into the feasibility of re-introducing Beaver to England. The report concludes that it would be feasible to re-introduce Beaver into England and that this would potentially bring several benefits. However the report also stressed the need for thorough public consultation of any candidate sites and the need for an effective monitoring and management plan to be in place. The report was commissioned to provide a full understanding of the implications of a re-introduction and no decision has been made as to whether re-introductions should take place. The report can be viewed at:
http://www.naturalengland.org.uk/Images/NECR002_tcm6-10287.pdf

As reported in "The Scotsman", a consortium including government agencies and universities, led by the Game and Wildlife Conservation Trust (GWCT) is putting together a funding bid to the EU with the aim of eradicating Mink from parts of the UK. The money would be spent on trialling mink trapping programmes in parts of the UK where Mink are particularly abundant. The effectiveness of such schemes would give an indication as to whether it would be feasible to eventually wipe out Mink across the whole of the UK.

As is now well-publicised, Mink numbers appear to have been declining naturally over the last decade and this has shown a correlation with the increase in Otter numbers. Some good

news possibly on two fronts then is that Otters continue to turn up in new locations on Teeside. David Harrison saw one on Dorman's Pool on 10th February, while Alistair McLee found spraint on a board next to a pond just west of Kirklevington. Steve Lynas continued his affinity for unusual mustelid sightings with a report from his younger brother who is a police community support officer in Skinningrove. His brother heard splashing in the beck, which flows into the sea at Skinningrove and on investigating he saw 3 otters. He said that the light wasn't good but from the actions and size he discounted them being Mink. Finally you may have seen in the media, news of the first otters to be reported on Teesmouth National Nature Reserve. There had been nocturnal sightings over several weeks in December 2008 and January 2009 including, on one occasion, a pair said to be "frolicking" in the Seaton Channel. Assuming that such frolicking might lead to baby otters it was decided to create some purpose built holts to give a bit more choice in denning sites. Two particularly sturdy holts were created by students from East Durham & Houghall College (Thank you Jonathan) and sponsored by Huntsman Tioxide. The resulting handiwork resulted in a second brief appearance on Look North for a little known but enthusiastic Hartlepool ecologist. Just last week I came across an otter spraint near the river Tyne just east of Corbridge. The spraint seemed to comprise solely of bits of small mammal bone and fur and was deposited on an inconspicuous bit of rough grass beside a mown path. But the thing that stands out most for me about this spraint was that I actually got my wife to sniff it. However she was as unimpressed with this notable mammal record as she had been with the badger latrine that I'd showed her earlier on the walk.

Hartlepool is definitely becoming the place to go to see mammals in a marine environment. At a talk to Teesmouth Bird Club I was pleasantly surprised to hear that Harbour Porpoise sightings are almost routine on any seawatch off the Headland and only limited by poor weather conditions, especially rough seas or mist. Chris Bielby supplied me with a copy of his records and he believes that there is a resident population of about 5 Porpoises off Hartlepool with other similar groups probably extending across the Tees Bay to South Gare and beyond.

The Chair of Teesmouth Bird Club, Ted Parker, had an even more impressive cetacean sighting off Teesmouth in 2008 and describes watching a pod of around 12 Bottlenose Dolphins. "The pod of Bottlenose Dolphins was about 1 km offshore but we got good "scope" views. There were at least 2 calves with the adults, which numbered about 10. The pod was very active, splashing around, breaching occasionally and spending a lot of time on the surface. They were often easy to locate by a flock of hovering gulls, so presumably they were fishing. The pod was watched for about an hour, during which time it moved gradually north. Their large dorsal fins were easy to see and, when one breached, I could clearly see a 'beak', helping to confirm their identity. This is only my 3rd ever sighting of this species in over 40 years birding around the Tees - previous records were off Hartlepool Headland and a single in the mouth of the Tees, all within the last 10 years".

I'm beginning to worry that my article on Harvest Mice in the north east might never get finished. I'm just about to send off the final proof when someone finds another record. This time it was Kenny Crooks who found 3 Harvest Mouse nests at Eastfields farm near Nunthorpe in mid-March. The nests were quite fragile as might be expected considering that they had put up with some pretty poor weather conditions over the winter. Two were about 10 cm off the ground and the other was at 0.5m. The highest one was in the long grass, which had remained upright inside a wire mesh tree guard. The area is a mix of grasses with some rushes; a mix of native broadleaf trees were planted there several years ago but these are well spaced out so there's plenty of light gets to the lower vegetation. Its main purpose

is as a pheasant holding cover and the only recent management has been occasional cutting of narrow swathes with a sit-on mower. The surrounding fields contain sheep at various times of the year, so the grass there never gets very long. One of the adjacent fields is quite damp and has a lot of rush, and from what can be gathered from the landowner, who has researched the history of the farm, used to be very marshy many years ago

Kevin O'Hara has been in touch as a follow up to my request for sightings of Mountain Hare in the Cheviots. The last one Kevin saw was in upper Coquetdale, just round the corner from Linshiels, at approx NT888073, in April 2000. It was half way through the moult. Kevin hasn't heard of any in ages and thinks that most have gone now, out competed by that nasty alien/BAP priority species (take your pick) the Brown Hare. Has anyone had a sighting more recently than 2000?

Another species that can change to a white colour in winter is the Stoat. Kevin Bulmer has told me of reports of Stoats in ermine at Hutton Rudby and Mount Grace Priory this winter. Also Chris Bielby took a series of photos in March of a Stoat at Greta Bridge on which just the tail and rump are white, presumably moulting out of the ermine phase. I've never seen a stoat in ermine and didn't really expect to as it would be quite a disadvantage in these parts as we hardly ever get snow. I would be interested to hear if anyone knows whether Stoats in ermine are reasonably common in the north east or very unusual.

I tend to find these days that birders are my best source of mammal information. As if to prove it, a couple in Dorset, participating in the RSPB's garden birdwatch spotted a Raccoon sleeping in their tree. They thought it was a cat at first so fired a water gun at it to chase it away from the birds and only realised that it was a Raccoon when it raised its head. It apparently went back to sleep on the same branch and was eventually "rescued" by the RSPCA. A further two Raccoons were reported as being on the loose back in 2003. One was filmed in a garden in Leicestershire as it ate peanuts. The other was seen running along a country lane in Northamptonshire. Neither of these was recaptured. Raccoons have recently been removed from the Dangerous Wild Animals Act and a licence is no longer required to keep them in captivity; so now that it is possible to keep them without anyone ever needing to know. I reckon that this attractive escapologist will be part of Britain's mammal fauna by the next edition of the Handbook of British Mammals.

Jonathan Pounder and I were very surprised at the recent Big Cats in Britain conference to hear about a big cat sighting next to Catcote Road in Hartlepool. Surely not next to a built up area and busy road we thought. However Steve Robbins e-mailed me recently to say that he had disturbed a group of 5 Roe Deer on an allotment site not 100 yards from where the big cat was allegedly seen. Perhaps we are seeing a new phase of urban wildlife.

I have learned to never say never with wildlife and love to hear of new discoveries that back that up. I was particularly heartened then to hear that a population of 250 Mountain Gazelles had been found in southern Turkey. Mountain Gazelles are an endangered species with a global population of less than 15,000 so this is a significant discovery. What strikes me as more significant though is that no-one knew that there were Mountain Gazelles in Turkey until these were discovered. Now I know that the natural history of Turkey is perhaps not as well studied as that of, say, Hampshire but it is hardly the highlands of New Guinea either and 250 is quite a lot a lot of gazelles to go unnoticed. Gives me some hope as to what else might be out there to be discovered.

On my living room wall hangs a picture entitled "The Last Wolf" that depicts the last wolf in England that, it was claimed, was killed at Humphrey Head in Cumbria. I bought it as a symbol of what we've done and with a hope that we might put it right one day. Wolves may no longer be with us in body but from the following account, told to me as matter of fact and in all seriousness by Kevin Bulmer, perhaps they are still with us in spirit. *"One night last winter, early evening, I was making my way through the Hall Wood when about 5-20 yards in front where a track goes off to the right, it was just like a spot light was switched on with a grey blue light you get off the moon. A grey wolf appeared from the left of this patch of light and bounded like it was in deep snow across to the right down the track before fading away after about 8 or 9 bounds. My two [terriers] were busy, heads down in the undergrowth and didn't react but I know a wolf when I see one. It certainly wasn't a German Shepherd on steroids and dyed its fur that's for sure! I have eliminated all possible light sources ie cars in the distance turning throwing headlights in an arc, poachers lamping, police helicopters. But even if there was a logical explanation for the light source, where does the wolf come from."*

Autumn 2009

It's always a pleasure to be able to report some good news and particularly so for Britain's fastest declining mammal, the Water Vole. Andy Lees has reported finding all the classic Water Vole signs in the Coalcleugh area of West Allen in an area where previous surveys had failed to find the species. There have subsequently been other sightings in that area.

Water Voles have also made a welcome return to Greatham Beck. This was their main stronghold in Hartlepool but there were no signs of them last year and it was feared that they had disappeared following a sighting of Mink in that area.

The Harvest Mouse continues to prove that it is hanging on in the North East. Don Griss extracted a Harvest Mouse skull from a barn owl pellet that was collected at South Burden in Darlington. There are 3 recent records of Harvest Mice within 2-4km of the location where the owl regurgitated the mouse, so this doesn't necessarily mean that this is a new location but it does mean that they are still around somewhere. Don also found a water shrew skull in the pellets and this would almost certainly be a new 10km record.

And now for the bad news! It looks like the Natterer's bats at Long Newton have been silenced for good. Two surveys at St Mary's Church this June drew a complete blank. Their numbers had declined to just one or two bats in recent years. This was the only known colony in Cleveland, indeed the only record of the species in Cleveland until the last two or three years when several individuals have turned up, if interpretations of bat detectors can be relied on. A similar fate may have befallen the only known Brandt's bat colony east of the A1, at Stainton in Middlesbrough. Like the Natterer's colony, this was one of Tony Wardhaugh's discoveries in the late 1980s/early 1990s and both colonies numbered in the mid-twenties then. A survey this year by Kenny Crooks and Anne Martland was unable to detect a roost though they did have a brief encounter with a single bat that could well have been Brandt's and it is planned to do further surveys.

Another species that tantalises with possibilities of its continued presence is the Pine Marten. Kevin O' Hara has had good report from just south of Rothbury in the Simonside Hills. It was seen from about 15m as it crossed the road and the person who saw it was familiar with Pine Martens from holidays in Scotland and also gets Stoats in his garden so knows the difference.

Pine Martens are traditionally thought of as inveterate predators of squirrels (although in reality they rely more on Field Voles). However they might have some competition in the squirrel predation stakes. Alistair McLee heard the following from a ringer contact who rings Goshawk pulli in the forestry woodland to the south of the North York Moors. Last year a camera was placed at a nest. The male, which has the sole duty of feeding the incubating female and the young, whilst they are tiny, brought in 27 Grey Squirrels to her. Alistair speculated as to whether such levels of predation would have slowed the expansion rate of Grey Squirrels northwards had Goshawks been present in the UK when Grey Squirrels were becoming established, though he also wondered what species of squirrel the Goshawks in Kielder were eating.

While having Martens in Northumberland might be one thing, proving that they are Pine Martens is another. You may recall an item that Kevin wrote some time back in which he reported that DNA research on Marten road casualties in Northumberland found that they were American Martens, not Pine Martens. I've also told recently that there was a fur farm at Stocksfield that bred Martens, which I suppose could be the source of those American Martens. Northumberland Wildlife Trust have been working with the Vincent Wildlife Trust to collect what might be Pine Marten droppings and get DNA analysis done on them. Apparently there is no way that Pine Marten droppings can otherwise reliably be told from Fox droppings, so forget this, "smells like parma violets" business, even the one and only Kevin O'Hara can't tell them apart with certainty. This survey is now being extended to County Durham with a scatological foray to Hamsterley Forest on 8th August.

One surprising result of DNA analysis has been that Welsh Pine Martens are genetically distinct from Scottish ones. At least they used to be because all of the sample material has come from museum specimens, with the most recent dated 1948. There have been very few sightings of Pine Marten in Wales in recent years and nothing from which DNA could be obtained. This finding is important because it means that re-introduction into Wales wouldn't be an option unless it was clear that the original Welsh population had completely died out. There are reckoned to be less than 50 Pine Martens left in Wales so its future is uncertain. Work is ongoing to try and find scats from North Yorkshire that can be attributed to Pine Martens. The latest batch was initially considered to have been from Pine Martens but the assessment was then revised to Stoat. With Pine Martens doing comparatively well in Scotland and Ireland, it does beg the question as to why Pine Martens haven't made a comeback elsewhere. Surely there is loads of suitable habitat in Northumberland, North Yorkshire and particularly Wales. I wonder what the other factors might be?

An animal that I would love to get some DNA analysis done on is one that appeared in Hartlepool a couple of months back. A colleague of mine told me about a friend of his who had been approached by a strange animal, on Hart Lane, on the outskirts of Hart. He was on his way back from Tesco's when the animal inquisitively came up behind his dog before running off across a field. It was described as long and thin, brown in colour with a bushy tail and very noticeable canines; it was too big for a Stoat but definitely wasn't a Ferret. Now what that might resemble?

Hartlepool continues to delight me with its bestiary of strange beasts. Another of my colleagues was driving in to work down the A689 when she saw what she described as a Marmot, grazing by the side of the road. She described it as being a bit larger than a rabbit though the same colour, chunkier in build with a larger head and no noticeable ears. She thought Marmot as she had seen them in a zoo and a quick google re-inforced her opinion.

This is perhaps not as surprising as it may seem. Just this week the Daily Mail ran a story of a Black tailed Prairie Dog, a Marmot relative, living wild near Bodmin Moor in Cornwall. The story was accompanied by a photo which was of good enough quality to allow staff at Newquay Zoo to go as far as sexing the animal.

Another “Beast of Bodmin” was filmed recently in a back garden in a Cornish town (actually it didn’t say where, it could have been miles from Bodmin). The animal, a Palm Civet, was only slightly bigger and slightly more ferocious than a Prairie Dog (so not even a beast really). Palm Civets are carnivores, related mainly to other civets (sorry, if you don’t know what a civet is you are going to be struggling with this story). They are found in south east Asia where they are often kept as pets for their propensity to kill mice and snakes. They also eat the outer fruit of coffee beans; the beans themselves, once passed through their digestive tract and re- harvested, being turned into an expensive coffee. This particular Palm Civet was captured alive before it could multiply and endanger any small native animals, or Prairie Dogs for that matter.

By co-incidence Natural England have produced a new publication entitled “Horizon scanning for new non-native animal species in England.” The purpose of the report is to list potential new invasive animal species that might threaten biodiversity and to assess their relative risks. The higher risk categories include Arctic Fox, Leopard Cat, Siberian Chipmunk and Raccoon as well as those favourite whipping boys, Terrapins and Eagle Owls. While I would prefer that we didn’t have non- western European non-native animal species (except perhaps Mandarin Ducks because they are endangered and very cute and, anyway, ducks are a bit like plants and pheasants, people release them all over with impunity) and while there is no doubt that some of them have had a disastrous effect, I think that the likely harm from most of them is well over-exaggerated, for example:

- Arctic Foxes won’t get established because the Red Foxes will eat them as they do elsewhere;
- Leopard Cats aren’t going to make any difference when there are about 1 million feral cats out there already;
- Can someone tell me why terrapins are a problem? The main charge levelled against them of eating baby ducks is unlikely because the crows will eat all the baby ducks first. We must be one of the few countries not to have terrapins in their ecosystem and all the other ecosystems seem to manage. (In fact we did have a native terrapin up to Saxon times; bring it back once global warming sets in I say)
- And don’t get me started on Eagle Owls! If we ever find out that they got here by themselves we’ll be cheering them on as they help the Goshawks munch through the Grey Squirrels.

Meanwhile back on script with mammals, I agree that Raccoons are very likely to eventually become established now that they are off the Dangerous Wild Animals list (though I was totally wrong about Siberian Chipmunks but at least they occupy a niche that is currently unoccupied so shouldn't be in direct competition with anything; a bit like big cats really. Time will tell though. Incidentally Black tailed Prairie Dogs are classed as medium risk and Palm Civets don’t make it on to the list at all.

(As a slight postscript to this in the light of me banging on about re-introducing extinct species in previous editions and questions being asked as to whether or not that is NMG’s official position, I should point out that opinions in columns in this newsletter are mine unless otherwise stated, and not the position of NMG. In fact, in my columns, my comments

are occasionally meant in such a tongue in cheek manner that they don't necessarily even reflect my opinions.)

One non-native species that might now be facing extinction in Britain is the Wallaby. The only viable wild population in Britain occurs on Inchconnachan Island in Loch Lomond where they have lived for around 60 years. There are now concerns that they are adding to the grazing pressure on the island that is preventing regeneration of woodlands and allegedly threatening Capercaillie and other native wildlife; other implicated factors being deer numbers, bracken cover and recreational impacts. A plan is being drawn up to conserve the native wildlife of Loch Lomond's islands that will include control (culling) the wallabies.

Of course, Loch Lomond isn't the only place where the odd wallaby can be seen in Britain. They do have a penchant for escaping and one has gone on the run in Northumberland. The wallaby, imaginatively called "Hopper" has escaped from the Birds of Prey Centre at Kielder and is presumably still roaming the forest up there. Hopper was one of 5 wallabies at the centre and, who knows, if his companions manage to avoid the sentries then we may end up with a colony at Kielder. If so, I'm sure someone will accuse them of upsetting red squirrels or something similar.

I feel must apologise for mentioning fabled animals in two consecutive editions of Droppings however I simply had to include this report from the Bigfoot Research Organisation's files as it was made by a professional biologist, albeit a fisheries biologist. *"While on a mountain-bike ride down ***** trail, located approx 17 miles northwest of Chelan, Washington. I was biking alone, and the section of trail preceding my unidentified animal sighting was downhill and allowed me to ride quickly, making little noise. As I proceeded around the left hand bend in the trail, my vision was drawn to a motion on the ridgeline that continued to my upward left. What I saw was a tall (approx 8 ft), dark brown, longhaired animal running rapidly in a bi-pedal manner from the exposed ridgeline in a northwesterly direction. He remained in my line of vision as he ran through a moderately dense high alpine forest. It was astounding to me how quickly and quietly the animal was able to move for his sheer body size. I immediately stopped my bike with the initial sight of this animal. After stopping my bike, the animal remained within my sight for approx 10-15 seconds as he was running rapidly away from my intrusion. There was no mistaking this animal's height as I am 6' 4", and my estimate of 8 ft. may be a moderate estimate of actual height. There also was no mistaking the bi-pedal pattern of running exhibited by this unknown animal."*

Not to be outdone I have just today had my very own encounter with a creature resembling Bigfoot while out on a cycle ride. I was pedalling fiercely up the A68 keeping a look out over my right shoulder for motorists when to my left I glimpsed a huge, hairy, bipedal figure behind some trees in an abandoned lay-by. The creature, whatever it was, was bolt upright, taller than me and was covered in long, dark grey hair over its belly and thighs, with paler hair on its sides; I couldn't see a head or arms as they were obscured by foliage. It really was the weirdest feeling, for about 3 seconds my world-view didn't make any sense any more. Then as I passed it I managed to glimpse its head, 6-7 feet up among the foliage; it was a huge Anglo-Nubian goat browsing! (Ok it could have possibly been the devil but I'm pretty sure that most religious traditions don't have him down as a herbivore). I'm wondering whether, if I send the first part of my story to the press, it will spark off a series of reports of people claiming to have seen a strange hairy biped stalking Darlington. I sometimes wish I were a braver man.

I've just returned from a week's holiday in Northumberland, a county, which, to my shame, I have scarcely visited in the past. I think that will now change having taken in some fabulous scenery and my wife having glimpsed some delightful gift shops and galleries that she would like to spend more time in. However I was a bit disappointed with the mammals there. I was aware that there were very few dots on the map for mammals, other than squirrels, in Northumberland and was hoping to add quite a few 1km records of my own. In the end I only came up with about half of the number of mammal records that I was hoping for. Admittedly I was hampered a little in that I was only going to get away with digging around in long grass for Field Vole signs the once, and I was told in no uncertain terms "You're not looking at poo again!" However to be fair my wife did drag me out to do some bat watching along the Coquet so it almost evened out. What particularly struck me though was the paucity of road kill in Northumberland. Now don't get me wrong, this isn't how I like to see wildlife and I always feel a twinge of sadness when I see it but it is an effective way of getting lots of dots on maps. So I am left wondering, is everyone a careful driver in that county or is it that the maps are accurate and there really aren't many mammals in Northumberland.

Winter 2009

Batman Returns

Other than a headline about Ozzy Osbourne's pet dog being eaten by a Coyote (shame it was the dog) and a Skunk that turned up in the Forest of Dean, all of the "Droppings" that I've collated for this edition have been about bats.



A Skunk. Just in case there is anyone out there who doesn't know what a Skunk looks like
(Photo: Ken Smith)

Those of you who have watched the BBC series "Lost Land of the Volcano" to see the undiscovered wildlife or even, as someone admitted to me, to see the pretty "bat lady", will know that there are still bat species out there to be discovered. However you don't have to go to the ends of the earth to discover new bats.

At the Smithsonian Museum two new species of Flying Fox fruit bats were found in drawers where they had been confused with other bat species. Collected some time in the nineteenth century, both bats were from the islands of Samoa. One of them was the largest bat species recorded from the Polynesian region and had large jaws and teeth, which suggested that it fed on hard seeds or thick-skinned fruits. Unfortunately both species of bat are now thought to be extinct as they haven't been recorded since.

Closer to home, Durham Bat Group have been making some new bat discoveries of their own. Paul Lupton managed to record a distinctly Pipistrelle-shaped sonogram from Wolsingham in August. Nothing startling about that, but what was particularly interesting about this sonogram was that the peak energy of the call was around 40kHz. In other words a bit too low for Common Pipistrelle but approaching the peak frequency of Nathusius' Pipistrelle. Then in early September Jonathan Pounder had what he thought could have been Nathusius' Pipistrelle at Ormesby Hall in Middlesbrough. Nathusius' Pipistrelle has only recently been recognized as part of Britain's bat fauna and in the Durham Bat Group area there have only been two previous records; one from the lake at Whitworth Hall and the second, a somewhat contentious one and I say that as the person who recorded it, from the Hart to Haswell Walkway in Hartlepool.

By co-incidence, in September the Bat Conservation Trust launched a new national survey targeting randomly selected, large water bodies for Nathusius' Pipistrelle records. Durham Bat Group members got BCT to randomly select them Tunstall Reservoir, Crookfoot Reservoir and Lockwood Beck Reservoir and all three sites turned up Nathusius'. I took part in the survey of Crookfoot Reservoir and was astonished to find out how distinctive the Nathusius' Pipistrelle calls were. I've always been a bit dubious about certain records that purport to distinguish between the other two Pipistrelle species, the Common and the Soprano, so I thought that it would be equally unclear whether we were hearing Common or Nathusius' however the peak frequency really was quite distinct at 37/38kHz (and increasingly tinny above 40kHz) and they seemed to be putting more energy in to the calls compared to other Pips. This was a new species for everyone in our group and needless to say we were buzzing more than the bat detectors. When I got home and told my wife she thought I had called it a Nathusiasm Pipistrelle. I have decided to appropriate "nathusiasm" as the term to describe the collective mood of a group of bat workers when seeing a new species of bat.

Someone who must have been filled with nathusiasm would have been Matt Zeale from the University of Bristol. He was using an ultrasonic lure to try and tempt the very rare Barbastelle bat into his mist nets in Pembrokeshire when he caught the even rarer Bechstein's bat. What was even more remarkable about this was that it was 100km further west than Bechstein's had ever been recorded before. Added to that, Bechstein's are reported as preferring drier sites than this one in Pembrokeshire. It seems that we have a lot to learn about bats even in this country.

Speaking of having a lot to learn about bats, some researchers, again from Bristol University, have found a group* of Soprano Pipistrelle bats in a canyon in Italy that regularly come out to feed during daylight. Bats can occasionally be seen flying in daylight (I can recall seeing a group* of Noctules flying over a lake in North Yorkshire at midday in mid-November) though they are thought to be otherwise exclusively nocturnal to avoid predation by diurnal raptors. Only one other population of bats was previously known to fly during the day and that is found on an island in the mid-Atlantic where there are no birds of prey. It is thought that

the forest canopy to the canyon might protect the bats from predation but that does beg the question as to why that doesn't happen in many other steep-sided, tree covered valleys.

(* From time to time I am asked what the collective noun for a group of bats is and I have to say that I have no idea. Even looking it up on the Internet, the only thing that comes up is a colony. Now if you can have a "crash" of rhinos and an "exaltation" of larks then surely bats deserve something more fitting. I think we should have a competition to find a collective noun for them; I'm going for a "flitter" of bats; does anyone have any other suggestions?)

This column has reported previously on Greater Noctule bats catching and eating passerine birds in southern Europe. Now it appears that some passerines have turned the tables. In a cave in Hungary, Great Tits have learned to prey on roosting bats. The Great Tits, hearing bats squeaking, enter the caves and start eating the live bats, sometimes carrying them off to a perch to do this. In total the birds have been recorded killing 16 bats in this way, pecking away all of the muscle, fat and even the brain. The birds appear to be actively seeking out the bats as they flew towards speakers that broadcast the sound of bats. Similar behaviour has been recorded before, with passerines pecking out the brain cases of hibernating bats but this is the first time it has been recorded with bats during their active season.

Finally, Robert Woods of INCA got permission for a few of us to explore a lost world of our own; the extensive woodlands owned by Cleveland Potash Mine at Boulby. I have long suspected that these extensive woodlands that run up from the sea to the moors could possibly harbour some of the most interesting assemblages of bats in the north east and I was particularly interested to see whether swarming behaviour would occur in the old mine entrances. Robert was equally optimistic about the area's potential for invertebrates, particularly moths, and I had a gut feeling that this would also be where the "Beast of the Bay" (see Big cat Diaries) hung out. Accordingly we set out with our own array of high tech equipment: several types of frequency division and heterodyne bat detector; two types of moth trap; night vision binoculars; high intensity flashlights; GPS and Dave Thew's I-Phone that could do all manner of amazing things including identifying the constellations. Unfortunately we forgot the portable global warming kit and the cold weather reduced the bat numbers to a Common Pipistrelle in the shelter of the woodland rides. Co-incidentally, the week after I was at least proved right about the bats when a Whiskered/Brandt's bat and then a Long Eared Bat flew in to the Potash factory and stayed long enough to have their photos taken. Both of these, as far as I am aware, are the only records of those species for a good 10km radius. I should point out that our brief expedition to the "Land that time forgot" did result in a few other wildlife records; a hedgehog; two distant Tawny Owls squabbling in the woodland and a single Large Yellow Underwing Moth in the moth trap. The most exciting part of the night was me balancing on a stone while trying to put my glasses on so that I could identify a Common Shiny Woodlouse on the entrance to an abandoned mine. I don't think that's going to be quite enough for the BBC so you may be left with Steve Backshall and the pretty "bat lady."

Spring 2010

Following on from this column's last edition, bats are still making the news. This time it's late bats that have grabbed the attention. My latest bat sighting ever was of a group of Noctules in mid Nov on a freakishly warm day in the early nineties and from my enquiries a couple of years ago it was generally agreed that bats in the north east are in hibernation by

the beginning of November and tend not to stir until early spring, with the occasional bat coming out in late winter if there's a mild spell. The past couple of winters have seen some exceptions to this rule. Simon Lamplough had one flying round his garden in Hartlepool in the second half of November 2009 and one was seen flying in a garden in Riding Mill on 1st December 2008. Even more perplexing was the creature caught on a "Stealth cam" by David Pearce of Durham Wildlife Trust at around 6.30pm on 5th December 2009. With the temperature showing on the screen as a mere 40F an apparition flits back and forth across the screen. It is either a bat, a very large moth whose wings bend in the middle in a most un-moth-like way or one of those strange lights that appear every time someone sets up a camera for a paranormal investigation.

In the last newsletter Jonathan included a round-up of the results of the Pine Marten scat survey of Hamsterley Forest. In spite of a lot of hard effort none of the droppings collected turned out to be from Pine Martens; though to be fair none of us who collected droppings that day thought that our offerings were Pine Marten (we just didn't want to go back empty handed). This turned out to be the same for the survey of the North York Moors the following week, although I'm told that the material collected there was much more promising. I wrote an article for the Northern Echo about our fruitless search and got an e-mail from the Vincent Wildlife Trust saying that following my article they had received a sighting of Pine Marten from, of all places, Ushaw Moor! It did occur to me that the Vincent Wildlife Trust perhaps didn't know where Ushaw Moor was and I wondered what this sighting might score on the Jonny Birks -O-meter but you never know; stranger things have happened.

Speaking of strange, I was sent some photos of a group of unexpected mammals that had been uncovered by Chris Brown at Saltholme. Chris and fellow volunteers had been stripping away the vegetation that had grown up on one of the artificial Tern Island's in the middle of one of Saltholme's lakes. The island, situated about 30m from shore, is only about 20m*5m in size and is surrounded by boards some 18" above the water line. Incredibly then, when the vegetation was removed several Field Voles were found to be living there; indeed as there were three different sizes of vole, including some very small ones, it appeared that they had been breeding there as well. The volunteers had needed a boat to get to the island so in the absence of toad and badger I think we have to assume that the voles had swum there and scaled the boards.

If aquatic Field Voles means that we can't assume that every vole in the water is a Water Vole then a recollection from Gerry White means that we can't assume that Water Voles are always an even, nutty brown colour. Gerry was recalling when he was skinny-dipping above Langley Park. I should point out that this was in 1939 when he was about ten (lest you are tempted to emulate him). As he slipped into the water Gerry disturbed a Water Vole with a distinct white collar. Also around that time in Langley Park Gerry found a piebald rat in a coal house. As this was during the war, when there was room for nothing superfluous and pets tended to be dual purpose, ie cute and edible, he feels sure that this was a genuine piebald wild rat. Gerry's most significant rodent of a different hue record, however, was to be later, in around 1960, when outside the Regal Cinema in Durham he found a Black Rat (genuine *Rattus rattus*) dead in the gutter. Uncharacteristically unprepared for scraping up dead rats, as he was on a date with his future wife, Gerry had to leave it there but he was absolutely certain of the identity of what is possibly the only north east Black Rat record in living memory.

Black Rats may be an alien species on their way out in Britain but there have been further reports of alien species on their way in. Another Raccoon has been spotted in the wild, this one in Aberdeenshire, while nearer to home a dead chipmunk has been reported as road kill on the Whitby to Guisborough road across the North York Moors. The dead Chipmunk was a long way from either Whitby or Guisborough so this was either a fit Chipmunk, or someone flung it out of a car, or, perhaps there are more where that came from. Meanwhile over in Ireland there has been the first confirmed record of a Muntjac when one was run over in County Down in June. The Irish Environment Agency regards Muntjac as a potential menace and is reportedly initiating plans to eradicate the species before it can get established. Wild Boar also seems to be gaining a foothold in Ireland with sightings in several counties. Some of the sightings reported piglets, indicating that the Boar are breeding. The article that I read on this stated that "some conservationists are concerned that, as the Irish Wolf is extinct, there is no natural predator to keep the numbers of Wild Boar down." I wonder what the solution to that could be?

Any re-wilding enthusiasts among you who were planning to release Wild Boar back in to Britain should take note that have now missed your chance. In a recent amendment to the Wildlife & Countryside Act, following a public consultation on non-native species (see <http://www.defra.gov.uk/wildlife-pets/wildlife/management/non-native/s9-bansale.htm>), Wild Boar is one of two mammals (along with Chinese Water Deer) that have been added to Schedule 9 of Section 14. Section 14 is the part of the W&C Act that makes it an offence to release any species that are not either normally resident in Britain or a regular visitor. Schedule 9 lists those species that are established in Britain but which it would be an offence to release and these are mainly non-native species. Interestingly Gerbils, Coypu and Porcupines have been removed from Schedule 9, as they are no longer thought to be at large in Britain and hence now come under the general provisions of Section 14. Defra had previously considered that Wild Boar were covered under Section 14, (see <http://www.defra.gov.uk/foodfarm/farmanimal/pigs/boar.htm>) and I can only assume that they have been put on Schedule 9 because there is a grey area whereby it might be argued that they weren't covered because they are now normally resident. Of course this same argument might now apply to Beavers.

There has been no further evidence of Wild Boar in Hartlepool since the footprint that was found in The Howls a couple of years back but it has been a good autumn for mammal records there. In addition to the Nathusius' Pipistrelle found at Crookfoot Reservoir and reported in the last edition, both Otter and Harvest Mouse seem to be making a comeback. Robert Woods watched an otter foraging in Seaton Channel for some 20 minutes in broad daylight in September. More recently I found otter tracks on the beach near to Seaton Channel. Robert reckoned that the otter that he saw was a big one whereas the otter tracks that I found were fairly modest in size, certainly not from a big, dog otter, so it may be that we still have more than one otter down there.

I was alerted to the possibility of a new Harvest Mouse population when Deborah Jefferson the Hartlepool Countryside Warden handed me a nest that a school child had found on the floor whilst Deborah was taking a class from Hart Primary to do a hedgerow survey. The nest was a classic Harvest Mouse breeding nest in every respect; my only doubt being that it was found loose on the floor rather than being attached to vegetation. If definitely Harvest Mouse this would be the first record in Hartlepool for 150 years, in fact only the second Hartlepool record ever, and would represent the most northerly confirmed record in England this century. In view of the potential significance of this find I thought that a bit more evidence was required but I'm happy to report that a quick search of the spot where

the nest was found produced a second nest; this one woven tightly into a clump of Cocksfoot. With the possible exception of Whiskered/Brandt's bats it looks like the only Hartlepool mammal left to track down may be the Trimdon Panther. Place your bets ladies and gentlemen!

Summer 2010

Scent Marks

You guessed it; not enough material for Droppings. Actually I did have quite a bit of material in the end, but my computer died and when I eventually got the files recovered I didn't have time to do anything with it. Droppings and Big Cat Diaries will be back (I never waste material) but in the meantime there have been some very interesting reports this week that merit recording. My attempt to become a writer (which admittedly is unlikely to be lucrative unless I can think of something involving owls and boy wizards) took a step forward with two articles that I had published in the Northern Echo this week. The first of them about the rediscovery of Harvest Mice in Hartlepool prompted a farmer to write to the editor with a picture of a mouse that their cat had brought in. The mouse was safely released but not before they had the good sense to take a picture of it (I think we should give them honorary membership of NMG for that). It was a Harvest Mouse. What's more the mouse was found at High Beamont Hill Farm, Darlington, which is just half a mile up the road from me.

The second report is not as well verified but involves a sighting of a Red Deer about 4 miles south of Haltwhistle. It was describe as four feet high, dark burgundy colour with a white patch on its rear. The people who saw it were certain that it was a Red Deer and distinguished it from the Roe Deer that they saw later on their walk. In fact they knew enough to know that Red Deer aren't normally seen around Haltwhistle. As far as I'm aware there are no free living Red Deer in the North East other than a small group of escapees that may well be poached out now. As Red Deer are probably easier to spot than most, does anyone have any other sightings of them in the North East.

Finally just today I was out walking with my son in Wileycat Wood near Guisborough. I had my head down looking at plants (I should know better than to try and mix botany and mammals, except in a lamb casserole) when my son shouted me to see what he'd assumed was a rabbit running away. I only glimpsed the back end disappear for no more than a second but it was awfully big for a rabbit and the tail was big, held very high and pointed. What's more I couldn't find any rabbit burrows anywhere in the area where it could have disappeared to and my son said it didn't quite run like a rabbit. I think we probably glimpsed the back end of a Muntjac but to my utter frustration we will never know for sure and in terms of verifiable evidence I'm afraid it was no better than a scent mark.



The view of a Muntjac that we would have liked to have had (Photo: Ken Smith)

Autumn 2010

I am sad to report that I don't know anything any more! I used to know that Grey Whales that once swam down the coast of Western Europe, as they do now along the coast of Western North America, became extinct in the Atlantic some 300 years ago. As they are a distinctive, coast-hugging species there was no way they could have been missed in the intervening period. Then, completely out of the blue one of them turned up off the coast of Israel with the same animal later being seen back out in the Atlantic off Iberia. It's difficult to describe just how incredible this is; it's almost like finding that wolves had started turning up in the Caledonian Forests again. The only possible explanation must be that it either swam through the Panama Canal or came round Cape Horn, which is incredible in its own right; surely they haven't been swimming around unseen for 300 years.

I used to know that the only Dormice in the North East, since the mid-1900s at least, are the ones at Staward Gorge in Allendale. That is until Kenny Crooks mentioned that he remembers seeing them, and handling them in one case, at several sites in the woodland complex that runs from Moorsholm to Loftus, in the 1970s. Plans are now underway to try and survey these sites to see if they are still there as, I'm sorry to say, the 70s when such as Kenny and me were in our youth, is a historical record now.

Although there was no definitive proof, I was thoroughly convinced that Pine Martens were still around in the North east and the North York Moors. Now proof has finally arrived in the form of DNA from a dropping on a Pine Marten box in Kidland Forest. Credit for the discovery of what is the first confirmed English Pine Marten for 20 years, goes to NMG's own (at least he will be when he gets round to renewing his subs for this year) Kevin O'Hara, which is just reward for a lifetime tracking mustelids.

It seems almost mundane after than lot but a 45 foot Sperm Whale (that's units of length rather than number of appendages, otherwise it would be at the top of the list) has washed

up in the past few days on the rocks between Saltburn & Skinningrove. By co-incidence I learned about 10 minutes ago, from a colleague who had just come across Hartlepool Borough Council's policy from 1994 on "dealing with dead animals and fish on the foreshore", that in such cases there is an old law that the head of cetaceans belongs to the King and the tail to the Queen. I think I will suggest to Nick Clegg that he may want to consider removing that one from the statute book; it would save the public sector money if we don't have to post them separately.

I think I should clarify a very significant mammal non-record. Several people have excitedly informed me that Alcatheo's bat *Myotis alcathoe*, the bat species newly discovered to be present in Britain, has been found at Kielder. What the newspaper story actually said was that the Forestry Commission thought that it could be living in Kielder and that they were going to look for it. It's a bit like news, only it isn't!

Finally the WildPlaces team have filmed what is thought to be the first Raccoon to be sighted in the North East. It was filmed in one of Durham Wildlife Trust's member's gardens in central Durham where it had been visiting on and off for about a year. The story broke at about the same time as Cumbria Wildlife Trust reported that the population of Coatis, a raccoon relative, living in the Lake District now numbered around ten, with breeding taking place. It has been decided to leave the Raccoon in the wild, as advice from Natural England was that it wasn't a threat to native species as it only ate plants and insects. I hate to throw in a spanner but the classic element of Raccoon foraging is the way it uses its hands to search in streams for Crayfish (you will no doubt have heard of Crayfish, that well-known national BAP priority species). Raccoons are also quite partial to amphibians and bird's eggs. I hate to sound like Peter Marren but it strikes me that once upon a time Natural England would have known things like that. There was also another error in the report. Cheryl Nicholson, the Wild Places manager is quoted as saying, "Just when we thought WildPlaces had captured footage of every mammal species in the North-East a raccoon turns up on film." What about the Trimdon Panther Cheryl?

Spring 2011

At the risk of sounding like a twitcher, I ended 2010 with the full set of Pipistrelle species in the hand for the year. I had a call to go to a school in Darlington to pick up a bat that had been found on a pile of snow. When I saw it I thought that it was the smallest Pip that I had ever seen and when I got back home and put my glasses on I discovered that it was a Soprano Pip. This is only the second Soprano that I've rescued in 14 years as a voluntary bat worker; the other Soprano was the one found down the toilet in a house, which unsurprisingly was only about 100 yards away from where this one was found. I think this is the first known Soprano roost for Darlington. Had Nick Whelan not found a roost a school in Kirkleatham about a month ago then this might have even been the first Soprano roost for the Tees Valley; still you can't win them all.

Another mammal that required a bit of TLC was a mouse that was found in the corridor of Tees Valley Wildlife Trust's headquarters at Margrove. Remarkably this wasn't just the usual Wood Mouse or House Mouse, instead it turned out to be a Harvest Mouse; remarkable not just because Harvest Mouse records are so rare but because they aren't known for their association with buildings. In fact Harvest Mouse records are so rare that their presence is one of the criteria for designation of Local Wildlife Sites in the Tees Valley. I am waiting to hear whether the Trust's offices are to be designated.



The mouse that came in from the cold (Photo: Richard Perks)

As you are no doubt aware, mammals generally make things a bit more difficult for us than the examples in the above two paragraphs, though the resultant attempts at detective work is one of the things that I like about them. As I say to my birder friends, where would the challenge be if they had distinctive colours and sat on the end of branches singing distinctive songs? You will be pleased to hear then that I have a few bits of detective work for you in this edition.

First up is a nest that was found in a bat box, some 4m up in a tree in a small wood. Tantalisingly it is the right size for dormouse and the leaves woven in to the outer layer is another dormouse nest characteristic. On the less-optimistic side the area would be classed sub-optimal dormouse habitat and it was in Sedgefield, which has no historical records of the species. The other possibility would be another rodent, like wood mouse or bank vole, but I've never found a rodent nest in a bat box so I don't know what they would look like.



The mystery nest. Whatever made it, it wasn't a bat. (Photo: Durham Wildlife Trust)

Intriguingly (you may find I use that word a lot in this edition) Durham Wildlife Trust received another report of possible dormice from that part of the county. A couple from Coxhoe were turning their compost heap when they found two “dormice” hibernating there, two years ago. The animals were described as “about the size of a hamster and similarly coloured (rusty brown on the back and lighter underneath) but had blunt ended furry tails that were not so long as a mouse's i.e shorter than the body length. Their faces were also mouse shaped.” The animals were alive but didn’t fully wake up so they put them back where they found them and left the compost undisturbed. A shortish, blunt-ended, furry tail would fit Dormouse but not Wood Mouse. It could possibly fit Bank Vole, depending on what they meant by short and furry tail, but neither the colour nor the size are quite right. It has been suggested that they might have been gerbils, which would fit the description, other than the colour, and would be interesting in its own right but you would think that if they knew a hamster they would know a gerbil. In any case, gerbils don’t hibernate and neither do Bank Voles. In fact it’s a pretty good description of two Dormice, except for the fact that they were hibernating in a compost heap in Coxhoe!

Moving on to a slightly easier one, Sid Gibson from South Tyneside took this picture of a mystery animal at Jarrow Slake on the River Don in August. The classic head and hump profile immediately brought to mind the Loch Ness Monster. Apparently Nessie hasn’t been seen for a while so I wondered if the reason for that could be that she had migrated down to Tyneside. However the creatures muddy brown colour, broad head and tail and the fact that it appeared to be undulating in a vertical plane, mammal fashion, made me wonder if it might really be that equally rare Jarrow animal, the Otter.



Nessie or otter? – the age old debate. (Photo: Sid Gibson)

Another possible sea monster, or at least its remains, was found buried on the beach at Seaton Carew. Unfortunately not too much of it remained but the general consensus, based on the length of the lower jaw and the approximate number of teeth, is that it used to be a bottlenose dolphin.



Dolphin or Plesiosaur?

The secret to good detective work is to have a network of informants. While I was sat in the Doctors having my rabies booster because I am a Natural England volunteer bat worker, the topic naturally enough turned to “odd” wildlife. Whilst injecting me, the nurse told me that she had recently seen a Pine Marten crossing the road at Eastgate in Weardale. As the conversation was short and to the point (as was the needle) I didn’t get the full story but I asked if it might have been a stoat to which she replied that it was far too big for that. Intriguingly (see I told you) she had photos of her Labradors all over her office; so perhaps it’s not just big cats that Labs work with.

Another couple of interesting records that have come via Kenny Crooks and Chris Bielby respectively are a Muntjac seen this January at Bassleton Woods on the River Tees at Thornaby and a Humpback Whale spotted off Whitburn in late December.

I’ve also had a report of a melanistic fox on Seaton Common in December via Deb Jefferson. I wonder if this was really a melanistic fox; perhaps it was a panther. For that matter, given that sightings of alleged panthers have been written off before as being Muntjac, perhaps it could also be the case that the Muntjac sighting was really a panther. The chances of the humpback whale sighting being a misidentified panther are somewhat slim I admit.

Someone else who has been doing some mammal detective work is Les Robson, a volunteer with Northumberland Wildlife Trust, who has unearthed an interesting and potentially very significant record of a Scottish Wildcat from Northumberland (or as Kevin O’Hara points out, perhaps that should just be Wildcat seeing as its south of the border). *“The trail started by reading an article on the Tyne and Wear Archives and Museum’s website in which the writer refers to the Victorian taxidermist Rowland Ward. Ward was held in high regard in his day and was taxidermist to King Edward VII. Wishing to learn more about Rowland Ward I referred to the taxidermy website www.taxidermy4cash.com where they have a history of his work. This site includes photographs of some of his mounts one of which is a Scottish Wild Cat. The details attached to the cat are that it was shot at Moss Wood, Barmoor,*

Northumberland, 1863. I contacted the website to see if they perhaps had any more information on the specimen or could help in verifying its provenance. I include their response " The date can only be verified purely from the point of view that it would have mattered not to the person who shot it at the time. The records produced by Ward were for data relating to the animal and not for, let's say, historical data. I would suggest that it is accurate as what would be the motivation for Ward not to do so? He was a taxidermist to Kings and therefore, again, he would have had a reputation to maintain." "

What is particularly interesting about the specimen that Les has found is the date, as the latest accepted dates that Les could find for Wildcats in Northumberland were 1849 and 1852. Les also made the point that it was debatable whether this could be accepted as a good record, and it probably is wisest to be cautious without a detailed inspection of the specimen or some of its DNA, but it remains an intriguing record.

A situation where a bit more mammal detective work might have come in useful is regarding beavers in Scotland. As you will be aware, SNH have commendably instituted a re-introduction trial for beavers in Knapdale in south west Scotland. It now turns out that there was already a small but thriving population of these animals in the Perthshire area. The population is variously put at some 20-50 animals but they are apparently increasing and getting on with re-introducing themselves to Scotland. Hurrah, I hear you all cheer! However SNH aren't happy with these unofficial beavers and plan to capture the Perthshire animals and put them back in captivity, which is proving controversial and not just with me. Among the reasons that SNH give for re-capturing the animals is that it could jeopardise the Knapdale re-introduction because of protests from disgruntled landowners, but is that not a bit like saying that having beavers successfully living wild in Scotland might jeopardise a project that might potentially result in beavers successfully living wild in Scotland.

SNH are also said to be concerned that no one is monitoring the Perthshire beaver's welfare. It appears that these beavers have been living wild for quite a few years now and are evidently doing fine judging by their population size; they are in effect a wild population. I wonder if SNH are also concerned that no one is monitoring the welfare of foxes and Field Voles. I certainly think the Perthshire beavers should be studied to ensure that they aren't causing problems, although that seems unlikely as their existence has only just come to light. It would also be useful to check that they are definitely European Beaver and not American Beaver, which is a different species. But do we really have to control everything; can't we just enjoy the refreshing thought that sometimes nature can get on with it by itself and we can just enjoy the results.

Spring 2013

After what has proven to be something like a two-year absence, I am pleased to announce that the Droppings column is in motion again. The cause of this unprecedented bout of literary constipation has of course been the production of the NMG' new book, "Mammals, Amphibians and Reptiles of the North East" (or MARs as I tend to type it, to prevent carpal tunnel syndrome), which has taken up most of mine and several other people's spare time for the past year or so. The book is meant primarily as a statement of what we know about the status of those species in the North East up to the present time. In one sense then, it is a book that is designed to become obsolete. Even so I was surprised by just how quickly that has happened. The vagrant bat species account of the book lists an old and highly unlikely Notch eared Bat record. This is a species that had not been recorded in Britain, not even the

Channel Islands, as of going to press, though the species account did quote Tony Hutson as predicting it to be the next bat species to arrive in Britain. Once MARs was published I contacted Tony to ask him to if he would do a review of it. He was particularly interested to note that the Notch eared Bat has now been found in Sussex just as MARs was being published

It has sort of passed me by a bit but 2011-12 has been the Year of the Bat (technically I make that two years but no-one seems to mind, bats being such adorable creatures). I do wonder though whether the bats themselves have been trying to string it out a bit. In these parts, bats are usually into hibernation in late Oct and I have only once recorded them in November and that was a ridiculously mild day when several Noctules flew at midday. This year Phil Roxby recorded Daubentons on the river Skerne until 1st November and a colleague of mine had a bat flying around her garden (it was in Hartlepool so it will have been a Common Pipistrelle) on 8th November. Even more unusual was a bat that was flying around St Mary's Churchyard in Norton, Stockton on at least a couple of nights until 18th December. The fact that it was recorded on separate nights suggests that it intended to be flying rather than being the victim of some potentially "reckless" building work but even so, this would probably be a bat that hadn't made a suitable hibernation weight and was taking a gamble. I did note some swarms of midges on my allotment with the mild weather that we had on those days so I hope its gamble paid off.

The reason that bats are supposed to come out at night is to avoid avian predators during the day. Bats being highly mobile flyers, I had previously thought of such predators as being likely to be confined to the most manoeuvrable flyers such as Sparrowhawks and Merlins and have therefore wondered to myself if daylight flying would really be such a disadvantage. A recent observation by Vince Robertson suggests that their potential enemies might be much more numerous. Around 3.30pm in late September this year, Vince was bird watching at Drinkfield Marsh in Darlington when he saw a Noctule bat flying across in a direct, straight line. It was being attacked by a Herring Gull, which kept stooping and grabbing the bat's wings. The bat eventually managed to get away but you can easily imagine that in a place like Drinkfield, which attracts quite good numbers of gulls, that natural selection would soon weed out any bats that emerged too early.

I wish I was Kevin O'Hara. As if it wasn't enough that he gets to plodge around in all sorts of odd places, play with mustelid droppings and have Bob Wilkin write an ode to him, now he has blown the urban fox in my garden record that I was so proud of, right out of the water. At 5am, a couple of weeks back, Kevin was woken by his dogs going ballistic at something outside. Unsure whether he would be confronting a fox or a burglar he was amazed to find that the intruder was a Raccoon, which was turning over the plant pots on his patio. A little bit of investigation established that Rocky, the raccoon of that name that had been in the Ryhope Road area of Sunderland for a few months, hadn't been seen for four weeks. However to get to where Kevin lives in the west of the borough would have meant a trip of at least 3 miles as the crow flies and doubtless a lot more as a Raccoon would meander and involve negotiating a considerable amount of traffic. Could it be then that there are two Raccoons on the loose in Sunderland?



Rocky the Raccoon – on the loose in a Sunderland garden (Photo: Rick O' Farrell)

For those of you who can remember back to the last editions of Droppings you will recall that I reported that a number of beavers had been found to be established on Tayside and doing quite well on their own without being part of any formal re-introduction and monitoring programme. At that time the plan was to capture them all (for no other reason that I could tell other than that they were doing quite well on their own without being part of any formal re-introduction and monitoring programme). It now turns out that they were doing even better than was realised with a total of 150 beavers in 40 colonies.

The current plan for these beavers is to study them for a couple of years, including looking at their relationships with other land uses and any diseases that they might harbour. This will then form part of a report, along with the work on re-introductions at Knapdale, which the Scottish Government will use to decide whether to go ahead with an introduction of beavers to Scotland. It struck me that 150 sounds like a lot of beavers but particularly a lot of beavers to go un-noticed. Just to remind you (as its been something like 800 years since beavers were part of our fauna) beavers are big. In fact leaving aside the ungulates they are now easily our biggest terrestrial mammals. They also tend to leave more obvious signs than many mammals, things such as dams or trees chewed in half. Nevertheless they are nocturnal, all mammals are relatively cryptic and Scotland is a big place, so I don't mean this as a slur on Scottish mammal recorders. Instead what I do wonder is, if some people had been releasing former extinct species in the form of beavers; if those same people had also been releasing lynx, how long would it be before the rest of us realised.

It's not just the vagrant bats section of MARs that might be out of date. If a recent report of three humpback whales off Hartlepool turns out to be true then the vagrant cetaceans section will be as well. The report was posted on the Seawatch Foundation website on 13th December but I have been unable to find out whether or not it was verified. Also off Hartlepool Headland, in fact only about 300m out from the rocks, Ian Forrest spotted a whale on 19th October. He was unable to ID it at the time but noted that three humpbacks had been reported off Whitby the previous day. Who knows perhaps we will have to stop classifying Humpbacks as vagrants and Hartlepool will become a centre for whale watching; I can dream!

I'm sure it won't be long before MARs is obsolete in other ways as well and I for one really hope that is the case if it means that new records come in which add to our knowledge. I also hope that Droppings will become regular again but of course that will only happen if people keep feeding me information.

Summer 2013

Hartlepool Headland is definitely a different world. If the humpback whales that were claimed to be off the Heugh in the last edition seemed strange, Wayne Horsley has managed to find something that seems even more unlikely. What he saw and photographed in the first week in January was a colony of up to 10 Long-eared bats in a crack in the sea wall that supports the Heugh Gun Battery. Long-eareds are thought of as relatively sedentary woodland specialists, with most roosts being within 500m of woodland, but the Headland is a good 6km from the nearest woodland and Wayne's colony was only a few metres from where the North Sea batters the sea defences. A few years back Jonathan Pounder and Dave Thew collected an individual long eared bat from the docks at the Headland. At the time this seemed really odd in its' own right, but now I'm wondering if perhaps we have a new subspecies in Hartlepool, *Plecotus auritus maritima*.

I am sure you have gathered by now that the axiom with bats is that nothing should ever surprise you. So I am trying, unsuccessfully, to be a bit blasé about the fact that a Greater Horseshoe bat was found roosting in a cellar in Co.Wexford, Ireland on 24th February this year. Greater Horseshoe bats don't occur in Ireland and never have; their nearest colonies being in South Wales, over 100km away on the other side of the Irish Sea. While completely off the radar in terms of its sudden appearance it might not be too difficult to see how it got there, considering that bats can fly. However not satisfied with this, the report that I read suggested that bat researchers also want to know why it got there and I quote: "Further survey work will be undertaken by Bat Conservation Ireland volunteers in 2013 to see if this is a vagrant bat that has entered the country by accident, or if this is a pioneer bat looking to extend its natural range." I am intrigued to know how they are going to do that other than by interviewing the bat and questioning it about its motives. If you can do that with a bat detector then that really would surprise me.

I'm pleased to note that seal watching continues to increase in popularity in these parts. It is now becoming apparent that it isn't just a summer phenomenon either. In February a total of 62 harbour seals were counted hauling out at Greatham Creek and a month later I counted 35 grey seals at their traditional haul out close to the mouth of the estuary. Even so I reckon it could do with the odd boost that rare birds give to the nearby RSPB Saltholme. Just the ticket might be a young, melanistic grey seal that was rescued from a beach at Aberdeen in March. It's more a dark charcoal satin than glossy black but was still a very smart animal.

However if you really want to pull in the mammal twitchers you couldn't do better than a Walrus and, improbable though that sounds, the very same was spotted near the North Ronaldsay bird observatory in Orkney, also in March. There have been about 20 records of Walrus in British and Irish waters over the past 60 years but this appears to be the first for over a decade. Some of the stories about it in the press claim that the Walrus was part of our fauna into historical times but I couldn't find much to support that other than a few Bronze Age bones from Shetland, so I will put on hold for now my call to bring back the walrus. Nevertheless a young walrus, imaginatively christened Wally, did make it up the

river Ouse in Cambridgeshire in 1981 and there is a somewhat surreal photo of him sat on someone's lawn. So who knows, maybe one day one will come and bask around the power station.

And while we are still on strange you would think that if those Raccoons reported in the previous edition of Droppings got established in Britain that you would at least be able to identify one with confidence. Not so! In October last year, a raccoon-like animal turned up in a barn in Brecon, Wales. It turned out to be a Raccoon Dog, which looks remarkably like a Raccoon, at least from the front end. The following day a second Raccoon Dog turned up in the same barn!

A more established exotic continues to establish its grip on the North East, in spite of the incantations in the poem in the Winter 2012 edition. Kevin O'Hara had Muntjac tracks in the snow within Plessey woods on the river Blyth in late January thereby confirming their continued presence in what is, as far as we know, currently the most northerly part of the North East where they are established. Meanwhile at the most southerly extreme in the region, in a wood at Boulby I found their tracks in a sand bank on the Easington Beck (Technically this was about 18 inches into North Yorkshire as the beck forms the boundary at that point.). This is well away from any other confirmed sightings that I know of. Where they are more common, Muntjac are noted for inhabiting gardens, sometimes causing considerable damage. Until now I hadn't heard of this happening in the North East but Eric Paylor, writing in his wildlife column in the Herald & Post, tells of one that turned up in a garden in Fairfield, Stockton recently. Among the mayhem it caused, it managed to fall in to the koi pond and had to be fished out.



Small and assymetrical – could this be the track of the Muntjac?

Owl pellet analysis has again showed its great potential for confirming the distribution of small mammals. Don Griss undertook some analysis of barn owl pellets from the RSPB Saltholme reserve. From a relatively small sample he got the skulls of two Water Shrews

and a Harvest Mouse. As we scarcely get more than one Harvest Mouse record per year in this region it's good to have it confirmed that they are still present on the Tees Marshes.

With a somewhat larger sample, from a barn owl nest next to Errington Woods near Redcar, Mike Tucker came up with, 280 voles, 35 shrews including 3 possible Water Shrews, 20 mice, 12 rats and 3 birds, possibly Starling or Thrush species.

You may recall from the Spring 2013 edition of Big Cat Diaries that there has been a dearth of claimed big cat sightings. Interestingly what has always been a steady trickle of sightings of panther/puma sized cats continues to run dry and the only report that I have of panther-like animal is of one heard roaring by military personnel on the army ranges west of Richmond. I have long predicted that the sightings would one day dry up as any cat(s) out there reaches the last of its nine lives. So in one sense, if this pattern continues it could be said to support the idea that previous reports were based on a real animal. (I am of course also aware that there are alternative explanations to the dearth of reports).

Anyway there has been so little to report that there is no separate edition of Big Cat Diaries for this edition of the newsletter; instead I have tagged the one report that I have had for this region on the end of this column. However it is a very significant sighting. Firstly, because it was by Keith Bowey, a greatly respected recorder of wildlife. Secondly, he got a good look at it and meticulously described it. Thirdly, it was big, albeit clearly not big enough to be a Panther, nor did it resemble any known species. Keith has kindly allowed me to reproduce his sighting in his own words.

"For survey reasons I happened to be deep in the Durham Uplands (about two miles from the nearest road) as dusk turned to dark last night. I was in relatively remote gill to the north of Teesdale when at dusk (about 17.55hrs) I found a rabbit dump in an old quarry. This comprised 12 rabbits, part gutted, slit and spread open. Immediately my mind went on to bird of prey persecution mode - it certainly looked like it. Just then my thoughts were taken else, when a 'dark' movement at the back of the small quarry about 15m from where I was standing, caught my eye. The animal moved left to right behind a hummock of heather before presumably after pausing, making a run for it. It was a large black feline (and I am not talking black 'domestic cat'!). I saw it well for about four/five seconds as it ran across the back of the quarry, then up an incline and away on to the fell side.

I estimated that it was about 20-25% bigger than a large domestic tom, it had a very rough (really long, shaggy guard hairs) pelage. When it looked at me as it ran, it held its ears flat and at right angles to the head (like a very angry spitting domestic cat); it had a really broad face and a hugely thick and round-ended tail (I saw this feature really well as it went away from me). I didn't see the eye colour. The pelage was a dark, sooty grey/black (perhaps charcoal?) and I could see a shadow of 'tabby' type black markings along the back (with black stripes coming off this at right angles), down the mid-line of the spine and on to the tail which looked solid black.

In recent years I have, on at least two occasions in relatively remote Durham upland locations, seen what looked like feral domestic cats and in both instances they were black. But this one did not tally. It was far too big and thick-set and the tail was that of a Wild Cat. Have there been any other reliable reports of similar looking animals? My thoughts are moving toward a black-type feral/wild cat hybrid, as one occasionally hears of being reported in Scotland. Any thoughts? By the by, I checked - it had been eating one of the rabbits."

It's interesting to speculate as to what this cat might have been. As Keith pointed out, similarly large, black cats, known as Kellas Cats, are found occasionally in Scotland and are a complex mixture of wild cat and domestic cat genes, what is known as an introgressive hybrid. There don't appear to have been any genuine Wild Cats in the North East for 150 years but is it possible that there are still Wild Cat genes lurking in feral cat populations that occasionally show themselves? However that would also require a feral cat population and I have no idea whether we have such a thing in Teesdale or if instead it is just some domestic cats that roam a bit.

In the subsequent exchange of e-mails, Keith wondered if a cat such as this might account for the other reports of big, black cats and certainly some reports, while purporting to be of big cats, certainly aren't of cats reaching panther size. I have always assumed that gigantism of this order in domestic cats was unlikely. This is based on the assumption that size distribution would follow a bell curve but in 50 years of looking appreciatively at cats (alright 45 years, I was scared of them until I was about 8) I can't say that I have seen a single short haired cat that was even notably bigger than the average moggie, let alone 25% or more, and, if anything, black short haired cats always seem to me to be a bit smaller than other varieties. However I can't say that specimens that are well outside the normal range do occur from time to time. When I was looking up Kellas Cats (alright I wasn't sure exactly what introgressive meant either) I came across an interesting blog by the high priest of cryptozoology, Karl Shuker. The blog is based on a couple of scanned letters that claim to describe a big, black, but non-pantherine cat, that was killed as it fought and fatally wounded a large dog just north of Bellingham. It is claimed the cat was 50 inches in total length. You can read it at <http://karlshuker.blogspot.co.uk/2012/09/attacked-by-british-mystery-cat.html>

And finally...

Sad as its demise was, when I was sent this photo of a porpoise that had been stranded at Seaton Carew I just couldn't resist launching a caption competition. The leading entry so far is from my colleague Andrew Carter (unless, that is, you have a better one)



(Left blank for your own caption)

Autumn 2013

It all seems to have been rodents lately, so appropriately this edition of Droppings is very small.

Autumn is possibly the best time of year for surveying for small mammals. It's one of the best times to live trap as populations are at their highest, most of them have finished breeding so don't have dependent young, yet it's not too cold for them in an aluminium box with a bit of bedding.

It's also the best time to look for the gnawed hazelnuts that might just prove the existence of Dormice in your local wood. As you will probably know, the way in which certain rodents eat hazel nuts (and indeed other nuts) is characteristic of their species and with a good specimen (of nibbled nut that is) you can tell whether it was gnawed by Dormouse, Bank Vole, Wood Mouse or Squirrel. It's best to look for the nuts now, while the nibbling is fresh and several people associated with the group or the Wildlife Trusts are organising Dormouse hunts in woods around the region at the moment. More details of these are on the group's Facebook page if you want to join in with a bit of communal nutting. I probably shouldn't get your hopes up too much as the chances of finding Dormouse are extremely small and pretty much non-existent outside any of the old woodlands in the region but you never know until you look and you will almost certainly be able to find nuts that have been nibbled by Wood Mice or Bank Voles, which will almost certainly be new records for those species wherever you are looking.

One species of small mammal that can continue to breed into November is the Harvest Mouse. Several nests have been found at RSPB Saltholme in the past couple of weeks, just as an incidental part of habitat management, and one of these had seven young mice in it. Given the amount of suitable habitat for Harvest Mice at Saltholme it is likely this will now be their regional stronghold though they have been found throughout the Tees Valley. Further north there are old records, the most recent being from 1998 when Graeme Smart found a nest at Prestwick Carr. However Graeme has now found another possible Harvest Mouse nest in Northumberland so it is worth looking for them anywhere with tussocky grassland, Reed Canary Grass or Phragmites reed. Again now is the best time to find nests, as the vegetation dies down and the nests become more obvious. Even so you still need to root around in the vegetation to have any chance of finding them.

One rodent that wouldn't take any rooting around to find is the Capybara. This giant relative of the Guinea Pig is the ecological equivalent of a small Hippo, so spends its time lounging on the riverside or floating in the water. An escaped Capybara has been living on the Thames this summer and when it was finally captured it took three people to lift it into the truck.

If you would like to do your small mammal surveying in a more methodical fashion, the Mammal Society organises a variety of small mammal surveys in the autumn under their mini-mammal-monitoring, including Harvest Mice, Field Voles or just general small mammals (but not Capybara). For more details see <http://www.mammal.org.uk/mmm>

Other than the giants of the rodent world, such as Capybara and Beaver, perhaps the easiest rodent to survey for is the Water Vole due to its handy habitat of marking bits of bare ground in its territory with a latrine of liquorice-torpedo shaped droppings. As is well known, this is a species whose population is in free-fall and I just worked out that it's about seven years now since I saw the actual animal itself in the North East. A new report from the

Environment Agency suggests that the decline is continuing, in spite of some high profile success stories. Recently published maps show that it appears to have declined by a fifth just since 2011 (**JUST IN CASE YOU MISSED THAT FACT, THAT'S DECLINED BY A FIFTH, JUST SINCE 2011!**). Co-incidentally 2011 was the last time Water Voles were recorded in Hartlepool when Jonathan Pounder found them on their previous stronghold of Greatham Beck. Unfortunately that seems to have been a transient individual and the last time there was evidence of at least a small population was 2009. The Tees Valley Local Nature Partnership is currently thinking about a sub-regional Water Vole survey next year, utilising volunteer surveyors. The aim would be to see what we are left with and to see if it is possible to do some habitat management to improve their lot. It should be relatively easy to calculate the predicted number of Water Voles left in Hartlepool since 201, as its just 4/5 of 1 (oh, that doesn't seem to work!)

Post script. Isn't it always the way! You just get your column sent in and lots of new information comes to light. However in this case, it is a very good thing and I wouldn't want you to miss it.

I have been saying for a couple of years now that Water Voles are very probably extinct in Darlington. When I was doing the National Bat Monitoring Programme waterways survey at Rockwell in August, at the stop between Haughton Road and the new bridge, there was a plop as something jumped in to the water. I didn't see it but the person stood with me, who did, said it was Water Vole rather than rat. I didn't know if this was someone who knew the difference between the two so that remains a possible. However I've since found out that Deidre Murphy from the Environment Agency, who unquestionably knows a Water Vole when she sees one, has seen one at Rockwell within the past year. I am frequently wrong but I can't ever remember being quite so happy about it.



If wrong looks like this then I hope I'm never right. (Photo: Kenny Crooks)

It looks like 2013 might be the Year of the Harvest Mouse. Just this week I received several records (along with cute pics) from Thomas McQuillan of Naturally Wild. They are undertaking a GCN translocation at Eaglescliffe and have had several Harvest Mice turn up in the pitfall traps. A few Harvest Mice were released at the adjacent Elementis nature reserve a few years back but there were Harvest Mouse remains in Long Eared Owl pellets from Elementis preceding that release, so the species was known to be present in that area. However this is the first confirmation for several years that they are still there.

Finally, the Mammal Society has decided to repeat its Harvest Mouse surveys that were carried out in the 1970s and 1990s. This would add value to any Harvest Mouse surveys that you might want to do as the data could be compared to that of previous decades. Please contact them if you would like to get involved. Northumbria Mammal Group will try and arrange some training in looking for Harvest Mouse nests in line with the Mammal Society's request in their letter and details of this will be e-mailed to members separately, if this can be arranged.

Spring 2014

The early C19 French naturalist and palaeontologist, Georges Cuvier, is said to have declared that there were no new large animals to discover, because he knew them all. A statement as arrogant as that just has to be wrong and he was, of course, though to be fair, not very wrong. There have been some spectacular discoveries since then, the Giant Panda and the Okapi for example, but by and large they have been few and far between and with the world being an increasingly small place, the chances of further finds seems vanishingly small. But not impossible 😊

Last December saw the announcement of a possible new species of Tapir in Brazil, the first Tapir to be discovered since 1865 and only the fifth known species. What's more this wasn't a case of DNA splitting two species that look identical to us. The new Tapir, *Tapirus kabomani* to give it its proper name, has a different shaped skull to other Tapirs and is also a good bit smaller (smaller still being over 100kg).

Not to be outdone, Durham Wildlife Trust has had a report of a Tapir in County Durham. I don't have any details except that Jim Cokill thinks it probably wasn't a Tapir but suggested that the description might have fit a Wild Boar. However, officially, there are no more Wild Boars in County Durham than there are Tapirs. I am going to stick my neck out and say that there are no new large mammals to discover in County Durham because I know them all. A statement as arrogant as that just has to be wrong.

There may or may not be any large mammals to discover in County Durham but there were certainly some in Devon. A family of three Beavers was filmed on the River Otter earlier this year. The Devon Wildlife Trust, while not supporting unlicensed releases, considered that now that they were there then they should be left alone and rigorously monitored to see what impacts Beaver might have on the local landscape. The origin of these beavers seems to be unknown. You would think that it would be difficult to obtain, keep and then release several beavers without it coming to someone's attention but as was proved in Perth, where a population of almost 50 animals recently came to official notice, this doesn't seem to be the case.

It isn't only Beavers that might be passing under the radar. Last year UK Customs seized a total of eight big cats that were being smuggled illegally in to the country. Makes you wonder how many they didn't manage to seize.

On the subject of big cats, I am told that the demise of the Big Cat Diaries has been much lamented. The reason, as I have said in a previous newsletter, is simply that I hadn't had any big cat sightings reported to me for a good two years. That has sort of changed now. Sort of, in that the cat that was reported to me was biggish; bigger than the wildcat sized cat that Keith Bowey saw, but not really big in the puma/panther mould. I've struggled to find the exact location from the directions that I jotted down but it was roughly on the Eggleston-Copley road, before the Staindrop crossroads. The animal itself was described as bigger than a dog fox, or at least longer, though perhaps a little lower slung and dark brown in colour. The sighting was by a countryside ranger from Stirling, who is familiar with Otter (my first suggestion) and has also done some training on Wild Cats. I can't think of a wild species that it would resemble, except Golden Cat, though that seems unlikely given that there are extremely rare in captivity, so perhaps it is just another case of gigantism in a domestic cat. It was seen at fairly close range, as it walked slowly across the road.

An animal that didn't quite make it across the road but which must surely have as many lives as a cat, gave a waste team leader from Northumberland County Council an uncomfortable ride. As reported to me by Sam Talbot, there was a bump to the car but having no idea what he'd hit, he kept driving. Then when the car started overheating he went out and found a paw poking out, and when he pulled, it growled at him, so he got back in and drove to the depot to sort the car out. It took three bin men to remove the Badger which then galloped all over the yard before being recaptured by the RSPCA and taken to a vet. From the picture, it looks like there must have been quite an impact to wedge the Badger into the grill like that. Incredibly there were no apparent injuries to the Badger though there was £250 worth of damage to the car.



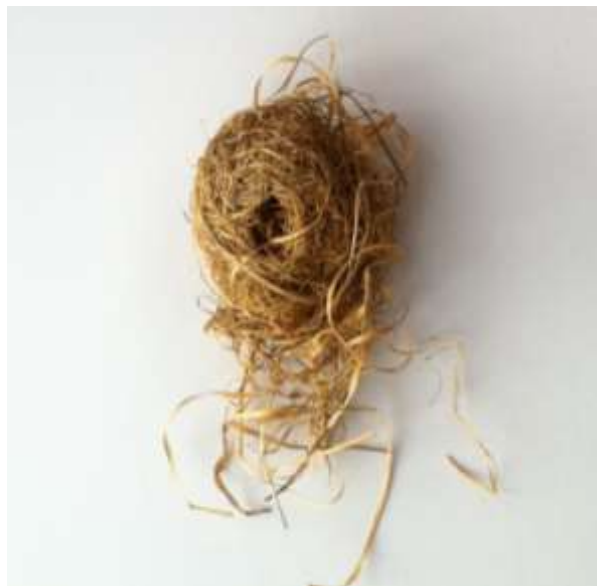
I wonder if the Council has a line on their timesheets for, "extricating Badgers"

Another animal that needed rescuing in unusual circumstances was a bat that turned up in the bottom of a glass vase. The Hartlepool Mail ran a front-page headline about a man who had got some flowers for his wife for Valentine's Day and when he went get a vase from his garage he found a bat lying still in the bottom of the vase. The article had him saying that he

would just like someone to tell him what sort of bat it was. That's an easy one, its Hartlepool therefore it's a Common Pipistrelle. My theory is that in late hibernation, bats move into vases to take advantage of the insects on the flowers that people buy on Valentine's Day. Anyway the bat must have been as hardy as the Northumberland badger and, unusually for a Common Pipistrelle, it was as feisty as a badger. Weather permitting, it should be back in the wild and looking for a new vase by the time you read this.

Being highly mobile, bats are known for turning up in odd places. There are even some continental bats that turn up in this country, some possibly deliberately (by deliberately I mean there may be a small proportion of the continental population that regularly aims their migration in a south west direction and ends up here, rather than that they've looked at the brochure and thought "I fancy Northumberland this autumn".) To get some idea of the scale at which this might be happening, Hugh Watson and Rachel Greave from Amec set up SM2 bat detectors on each of Lindisfarne, Inner Farne and Coquet Island in 2012. They detected Nathusius' Pipistrelle on all three islands plus Noctule on two of them. Soprano and Common Pipistrelles and a Myotis species were also recorded. They are planning to continue the work, so it will be interesting to see if any patterns emerge.

The Mammal Society's Harvest Mouse nest search came a little too late last year for most people to take part. I managed to get in one survey site in December, on a young woodland plantation at Merrybent. I was trying to find the first Harvest Mouse record, west of Darlington since 1976. Unfortunately the habitat wasn't quite what I'd reckoned on, being mainly floppy False Oat Grass and weedy Red Fescue rather than clumps of Cocksfoot and I struggled to find enough suitable habitat to survey. Needless to say I drew a blank but Ian Bell had better luck when he found a Harvest Mouse nest in the northern corner of Faith Wood at Cowpen Bewley Woodland Park. So yet another Hartlepool Harvest Mouse, though this one may well be a descendent of the release that we did at CBWP over a decade ago. The national Harvest Mouse survey will be resuming this November and December, so there's time yet to see if they are more widely distributed to the north and west of our region.



Harvest Mouse nest. As perfect as a thing can be.

Finally, Durham Wildlife Trust will be running an Otter survey across County Durham's rivers in the last weekend in April. I do hope they find some Beavers; I'd be ever so humbled.