THE COMMON DORMOUSE AT RIEVAULX ABBEY — OR IS IT?

On Sunday 11th June a small party from the Yorkshire Mammal Group met at Rievaulx Terraces, a National Trust property above Rievaulx Abbey, near Helmsley. Our purpose was to check the forty or so dormouse boxes, which had been put up in the wood in the summer of 1988. The woodland in which the boxes are situated contains many trees and shrub species favoured by dormice, such as oak, ash, bramble, honeysuckle and especially coppiced hazel. A veritable dormouse paradise, but locating these shy nocturnal creatures is not so easy!

Undeterred, we plunged down the steep, wooded hillside (at times somewhat faster than intended), and attempted to locate the boxes in the undergrowth. All the boxes were eventually found, but, unfortunately, none actually contained a dormouse. We did, however, find a small nest constructed from dried grass and oak leaves in one box, which could possibly have been made by a dormouse, but could equally have been the work of a field mouse. We also found a pile of eaten hazelnuts in another box which did seem more hopeful, as the gnawed inner edges were fairly smooth - a characteristic feature of dormouse table manners.

However, despite a distinct lack of dormice, the boxes, (which resemble small bird boxes) did contain a host of other wildlife: woodlice, centipedes and spiders were found in abundance, as were blue tits, which seemed to find the boxes extremely desirable sites! Only one mammal was actually present in the boxes at the time of checking, although evidence of field mouse activity was seen in places. The mammal itself was a long-eared bat, which was deemed to be male and disgruntled, but almost made up for the lack of other small, furry creatures.

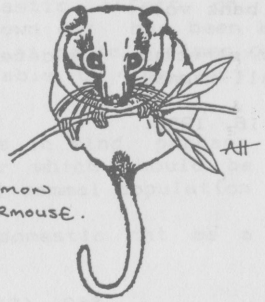
Although the relentless heat, difficult terrain, unyielding undergrowth, and the elusiveness of our prey, did make us feel as if we were actually on a Rwandan gorilla safari, the day was nevertheless most enjoyable. After checking the boxes, we were kindly given a vey interesting tour of the Terraces and Temples by the National Trust warden, and I began to realise just how much work goes into managing such a property.

After lunch, those of us who were still standing went for an afternoon stroll along the nearby River Rye, hoping to find some evidence of Otter activity. We didn' find any signs of otters, but we did discover some mink tracks on a mudbank, and watched grey wagtails and dippers feeding amongst the rocks and pebbles in the river.

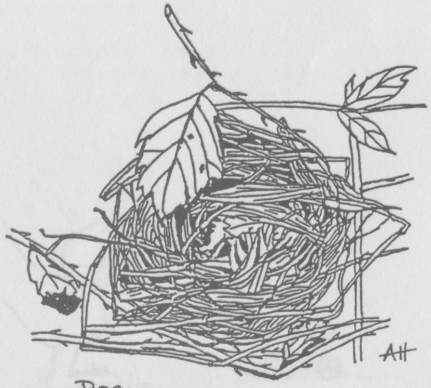
Despite a distinct lack of activity (at least desired activity!) in the dormouse boxes, we were fortunate to have a dormouse hibernaculum to examine, which was found in a Sussex wood and kindly donated by Steven Whitbrread of the National Dormouse Survey.

To finish on a more optimistic note, I would like to add that it is always worth remenbering: even if you donõt see a dormouse, it doesn't mean there isn't one there!

Ann Hanson



Common Dormouse.



Dormouse Nest.