

Species Fact Sheet: Wood Mouse (*Apodemus sylvaticus*)



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Quick Facts

Recognition: Sandy brown fur (darker towards the spine) with white/grey under side, protruding eyes, large ears, long tail. Juveniles are greyer overall, still with larger ears, hind feet and tail than house mice.

Size: 81-103mm; tail 71-95mm.

Weight: 13-27g.

Life Span: Few adults survive from one summer to the next.



Distribution & Habitat

Found throughout the British Isles, even on the smaller islands, the wood mouse is our most common and widespread wild rodent. It is an inhabitant mainly of woodland and fields but is highly adaptable and is found in most habitats if not too wet. It is rarely recorded on higher exposed ground with little cover. Wood mice are essentially nocturnal but some individuals may venture out in daylight.

General Ecology

Behaviour

Most wood mice live in underground burrows. The burrows are fairly complicated and may include nest chambers and food stores. Burrows probably survive from one generation to the next and will be enlarged or modified as required. Nests are commonly made of leaves, moss and grass. They are usually built below ground under the roots of shrubs or trees but occasionally are found in holes in trees, buildings and bird or dormouse nest boxes. Additional nesting material is used in autumn and winter; often the mouse blocks the entrance to the burrow with leaves, twigs or stones. Their predators include foxes, weasels, owls and domestic cats. Wood mice are important prey for tawny owls; when numbers of woodland rodents are low, owls may fail to breed.

Diet and Feeding

Wood mice eat seeds, green plants, fruits and animal foods. In a mixed deciduous woodland they eat acorns, ash and sycamore seeds for most of the winter, buds in early spring, caterpillars, worms and centipedes in early summer and blackberries and fungi in the autumn.

Food is cached in underground burrows. Food remains are found in disused bird nests, on tree stumps and in sheltered feeding places between the roots of trees or under ledges. They tend to leave the flesh of fruit and eat only the pips.

Reproduction

Individuals will nest communally in the winter but in the spring females usually take up their own home ranges and nest singly. However, home ranges shared by two females have been observed. Breeding males range over larger areas occupied by a number of females. Litters of 4-7 young are born in successive pregnancies from March to October but autumn litters are small. The babies are born blind and hairless. They are weaned at 18-22 days of age when their weight is about 6-8 grams. Growth in the summer is rapid and females can become pregnant when they have reached a weight of 12 grams. Breeding may continue over the winter if a good food supply, such as a heavy acorn crop, is available.

Conservation Status

Wood mice have no legal protection and conservation does not seem necessary as recolonisation after mortality is often rapid. Wood mice can be beneficial to man by preying on harmful insects, and many trees and shrubs germinate from forgotten wood mouse food stores.

Studies of woodland seed crops and population numbers organised by the Mammal Society show that the seed crop size strongly influences wood mouse numbers in the same autumn and in the following summer (more food leads to higher numbers and better survival). Numbers are probably synchronised: highs and lows tend to coincide in different parts of Britain, possible because tree seed crops are synchronised.