

Small mammals

Introduction

Churchyards, especially more rural ones, are really good for small mammals. They shelter in the longer grasses, feeding on insects and the fruits and seeds of hedgerow plants. Areas of shelter such as long grasses, hedges and scrub provides essential cover helping them avoid becoming the prey of much larger species, such as sparrow hawks, foxes and stoats. Many gardens use chemicals and slug pellets, deterring mammals such as hedgehogs. Churchyards on the other hand tend to be relatively chemical free, encouraging a greater number of insects and therefore small mammals.

The importance of churchyards for small mammals

Piles of dead leaves and wood in churchyards attract insects and worms, and act as an invaluable food store for hedgehogs. A compost heap is a buffet for small mammals with lots of snails and slugs. Wildflower seeds, grasses and berry bearing plants, such as a bramble, are essential food for mammals such as bank voles, common shrews and wood mice. Small mammals are a key indicator of change in habitat quality. With the intensification of farming practices hedgerow connectivity and grassy field margins have been compromised in some areas resulting in fewer areas of good quality habitat for these species. This emphasises the real importance the churchyard habitat has to play in the wider landscape for small mammals.

Well-known British species of small mammal you may be lucky enough to see in your churchyard include the common shrew, bank vole, hedgehog and wood mouse.

Did you know?

The spines on a hedgehog are actually specially modified hairs which form a crucial part of their natural defence, especially when they curl up into a ball!

Common shrews are known to be aggressive sometimes due to a territorial dispute. Listen out for high pitched squeaks, especially during the summer months.

Bank voles will leave a trail of scent behind them to warn off their rivals.

Wood mice will store their food in abandoned bird's nests. If you see berries in a bird's nest, they may actually belong to a wood mouse.

Wood mouse by Elizabeth Dack



Hedgehog by Tim Lake



Bank vole by Elizabeth Dack



Look out for small mammals

Small mammals often go unnoticed as they are mainly active before dawn and after dusk. Hedgehogs are one of the few British mammals that hibernate in winter.

Where to look

- Long grassy areas.
- Scrubby areas.
- Base of hedgerows.
- Compost heap.

What to look for

- Remains of grass from feeding.
- Droppings.
- Burrows.
- Nests.

How to help

Appropriate and sympathetic management can support and encourage a large variety of species into our churchyards.

- Maintain a mix of vegetation types. Retain old trees, hedgerows, wildflower, long and short grass areas. These provide species with the opportunity to shelter, forage for food, hunt, hibernate, breed and rear their young.
- Create a compost heap. This provides a great food source for small mammals, with woodlice, snails, worms and slugs present.
- Leave some areas of the churchyard to scrub over with species such as bramble. This cover provides somewhere for small mammals such as common shrew to shelter and hunt for prey, as well as somewhere for small mammals to raise young.
- Cut half of the hedgerow one year (in winter) and the other half the next, or one side one year, the other side the next, to help facilitate a winter food source for when small mammals need it most.



Wood mouse by Elizabeth Dack



Hedgehog by Richard Burkmarr



Burrow by Anne Edwards



Common shrew by Alan Price

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Wildlife refuge area by Emily Nobbs

