

## Nature Notes 2

### A Small Ball of Moss Influences Strategic Planning for Our Commons

I have spent 40 years **searching for something** on Upgate Common. Until a few weeks ago I had completely failed to find it. I had decided it probably had never been there and that I was never going to find it there in the future.

Then, while clearing a patch of scrub with my mind as far from this as it could ever be, there **it was**: about a metre from my knee, a tightly woven ball of fresh moss about the size of a large grapefruit or small melon, totally interwoven with the branches of a dense clump of honeysuckle stems. It was too late in the year to be a bird's nest, and too large to be a harvest or wood mouse's nest. Very significantly it contained a pair of fresh hazelnuts. Having consulted an expert I am now 98% sure this was a **dormouse's shelter nest**. They have 4-5 of these 'summer residences'. In spring they enlarge one as a breeding nest and in winter hibernating in one.



The reason I had given up hope of finding a dormouse nest on the common was that although it seemed a perfect habitat for them, with very abundant honeysuckle, they are **extremely rare in East Anglia**: only found in about five other sites in the whole of Norfolk, Suffolk and Essex. If the animal that built this nest was confirmed to have been a dormouse), either by finding a hazelnut eaten in an unambiguously dormouse way, or a nest in a specifically designed dormouse nest box\*, then in a *regional* context the dormouse that built this nest would be by far the rarest animal on our common, regionally rarer than either the

otter or badger, the harvest mouse or water shrew, or any of the reptiles found there and even, regionally, rarer than the great crested newt, which has special protection under the law.

A **dormouse's favourite meal** at this time of year is hazelnuts but it also fattens up for its long winter sleep by eating blackberries, haws and rose hips. Guess what we had been systematically cutting back to create more flower rich grassland: blackberries, hawthorns and wild roses? Time for a rethink. Because so many people enjoy seeing orchids along with the many other species of flowers, which enrich a country walk over our commons in spring and summer, one of the primary aims of commons management has always been scrub control. It still is but now we will have to think more carefully about which patches of scrub to leave where and how to encourage new patches in areas currently too overgrown for scrub plants.



Mark Hassel 8/10/2016

\*A dormouse nest box has a hole towards the trunk of a tree. They are available from the Mammal Society of London for £12.60. If you would like to buy, make, or sponsor a dormouse nest box to put on the common, please let me know so we can make sure they are placed in the most favourable places.

© Copyright for both photographs of dormice: Alamy Stock Photographs